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Coaching Fitness From Scratch

After an incredible transformation of her body and mind, Stephanie Vincent has become a Level 1 trainer and has suggestions on how to coach the unfit.

By Stephanie Vincent

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Aimee Lyons

I had been obese since I was a little girl.

I wasn't good at gym class, never played a sport and was always limited in my ability to participate in physical activities.



Chris Plentus

After avoiding physical tasks for most of her life, Stephanie Vincent now embraces them.

I walked through the doors of CrossFit King of Prussia at 320-plus lb., having no confidence or experience using my body. Greg Glassman says, “We fail at the margins of our experience.” In my case, those margins were about as wide as they could be. When I started CrossFit, I was undoubtedly starting fitness from scratch.

In a relatively short amount of time, I have made progress that probably did not seem possible—especially not to me. I have lost 100 lb. and gained many skills and personal records. I am one of CrossFit’s many success stories. However, this article is not about my success but rather what contributed to it. I share in the hope that trainers can help others like me reach their highest potential. My journey is my very own case study and serves as my base of reference, along with interviews I did with CrossFit King of Prussia’s lead coaching staff: Aimee Lyons, owner/head coach and HQ Seminar Staff member, as well as Jason Lyons and Nicole Sieller.

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Coaching the Mind

Aimee told me the biggest challenge of training her least-fit clients is “touching them deep inside to give them a sense of self-worth, pride and accomplishment. The mental hurdles must sometimes be overcome first.”

That was certainly the case for me.

My entire life I avoided physical tasks. When I couldn’t avoid them, I expected to struggle and would give up when given half the chance. I had zero self-confidence in my body. I never would have experienced the physical accomplishments I have if I had not begun to build the sense of worth, pride and accomplishment that Aimee mentioned.

I can remember moments during workouts in my first couple of months when I wanted nothing more than to quit. I’ll never forget one of them during my first Filthy Fifty. As I started the burpees—probably 30 minutes into the workout—I thought, “There is no way I am going to finish.” I looked at Jason Lyons, fully expecting he would give me permission to call it a day. He didn’t. He got on the floor and talked me through each of those painstaking 50 reps. Because of his high expectations, I finished that workout and discovered I was capable of overcoming, of surviving.

My future in CrossFit would have been very different if Jason had seen me struggling and given me permission to cut the workout short. Jason said that part of his job as a coach is to “show others that the correct answer to the voice in your head is ‘Yes, I can.’ ... If I look at a firebreather, they will come off of a pull-up bar and immediately look up, ready to jump back on. Someone with less ability may need to be reminded that they are capable of doing that, and it doesn’t matter if it takes a little longer. They *can* and *will* do the work.”

Aimee has said her expectations for all clients “are the same in terms of hard work, dedication and perseverance.” I would strongly advise trainers working with unfit clients to hold the same expectations for them as they do for others with more average levels of fitness. The expectation should be to finish workouts barring illness or injury. Those starting fitness from scratch might want to quit—and the slightest bit of permission might be all they need to stop. A trainer can refuse to give them that permission and then take the time to support them in finishing the workout. This may mean verbally coaching them to chip away one rep at a time or even running the last 400 meters with them.

**“The correct answer to
the voice in your head
is ‘Yes, I can.’”**

—Jason Lyons

It is also wise to enlist the entire community in that support. At CrossFit King of Prussia, athletes cheer on other members after they finish until everyone is done. I finished many workouts with a group of people motivating me. Finishing the workout—no matter how hard or long—teaches people of what they are capable, which is usually much more than they thought was possible. Learning the rewards of perseverance and determination is an invaluable lesson, especially for someone starting fitness from scratch.

Box jumps are one of the most difficult movements for me. When I started, the smallest box—just 13 inches—was too high. One day after a workout with box jumps, I added a plate to the stack of plates I had just used to see if I could do it. I landed it. The next class had started and was being instructed, but someone noticed my success. Next thing I knew, the entire class had stopped and was cheering me on, encouraging me to add plates to the stacks one at a time until I could jump no higher. I didn’t get to RX’d height that day (although I can now), but I jumped higher than I ever had before. The sense of accomplishment I felt after that experience was amazing, and it was bigger than what I had done physically. Being acknowledged by others made it even more powerful.



Aimee Lyons

Tips on Coaching Fitness From Scratch

- Hold the expectation that workouts can and will be finished.
- Acknowledge and celebrate all accomplishments.
- Identify strengths and expose them publicly.
- Encourage self-acceptance of abilities vs. comparison with others.
- Develop and use scaling for gymnastics movements that allows for full range of motion that mimics the feel of the actual movement to build muscle memory.
- Suggest tactile cues to build muscle memory for correct and efficient form.
- Promote scaling as a process toward RX’d workouts rather than just a substitute.
- Encourage the highest possible expression of fitness rather than just reaching baseline fitness.



Jason Lyons

Vincent discovered she was a natural when it came to lifting.

Jason spoke about his practice of “celebrating each and every advancement made.”

He said: “It is important to do this with every client, but even more so with someone with no athletic ability so he or she is reminded tremendous progress is being made.”

A trainer should take note of clients’ starting abilities so that, as they begin to progress, it is noticed and can be celebrated. To someone starting fitness from scratch, being acknowledged by trainers and peers for accomplishments—even those that may seem insignificant in comparison—creates a sense of accomplishment.

I am not exceptional in any physical skills, besides one: I am strong. Maybe it was from carrying around all that extra weight for so many years, maybe genetics, but either way, when it came to moving external loads, I was a natural. My community quickly acknowledged my gift. To be admired for a physical ability was a first for me, and it was a huge confidence builder.

When he works with clients with little athletic ability, Jason said he tries to identify one thing they are good at and then exploit it as much as he can to build confidence. If a trainer can find that one thing, he or she can use that as a tool to building much-needed confidence in the least-fit clients.

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Coming in last all the time and needing extensive scales for so many movements was sometimes frustrating for me. Although I was making progress every week, I was still so far behind most others. I discovered that when I felt sorry for myself, I didn’t get much out of the workout and accomplished little. But when I accepted where I was and gave my all to the movements, I had the best workouts and often accomplished things I could not previously do.

I had been adopting self-acceptance as a practice in all facets of my life when I started CrossFit. In the gym, the results of that practice are astounding. By accepting my abilities and being fully present in each rep of the movement, I get better. Feeling sorry for myself by comparing myself to others gets me nowhere. When clients who start fitness from scratch get frustrated, trainers can best support them by encouraging them not to compare themselves to others, to accept what they can do today and to give their all to that.

Coaching the Body

In the *CrossFit Journal* article [Assistance for Bodyweight Exercises](#), Coach Glassman said, “Our often-repeated claim that CrossFit is ‘designed for universal scalability, making it the perfect application for any committed individual regardless of experience’ finds its greatest challenge with bodyweight exercises—the stuff we call ‘gymnastics.’”

Coach is correct.

Scaling reps and weights is easy, but figuring out scales for body-weight movements can be challenging. I could do none of the gymnastic movements as prescribed when I started, but I have been able to experience great progress. Because of my own success, I have come to believe certain scaling strategies with the body-weight movements will help all athletes, but especially those starting fitness from scratch, to work their way to RX’d movements faster.

I started with jumping pull-ups. After a while, I became frustrated with still having to do them, but even the thickest band did not offer enough assistance for me to get my chin over the bar. Then I had the idea to try two bands, and with the two thickest bands I finally did my first full-range-of-motion assisted pull-up. That was in late November/early December 2009. I set a goal to be able to do one pull-up with a single band by the end of 2010. By Jan. 1, I had already met that goal. Jumping pull-ups were a great starting scale for me.

However, it was being able to perform the movement with full range of motion that jump-started my progress toward RX'd pull-ups. (I have a few unassisted kipping pull-ups in my repertoire now.) My experience with the pull-up started shaping my beliefs on scaling.

I believe scaling should always preserve the stimulus. I have found the best scaling for quick and efficient progress does not just preserve the stimulus of the movement but also builds muscle memory. Muscle memory is created for the prescribed movement when a scale allows for either full range of motion and/or mimics the feel of the actual movement.

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Every experienced CrossFitter knows the importance of building muscle memory. It is essential in mastering movements, especially complicated ones like the muscle-up and the snatch. Nicole Sieller talked about how building good muscle memory helps athletes progress toward RX'd movements. When their bodies learn how a movement should feel, it helps them "call on the right muscle groups at the right time to accomplish the movement," she said.

Muscle-Memory-Building Scales

Push-Up	Banded push-up: The band is strung on the pull-up bar and placed around the waist. The push-up is done on the ground. Inclined push-up: Boxes, walls or benches are used to do a full-range-of-motion push-up in plank position. Width of hands should mimic width in a push-up on the ground. Knee-to-plank push-up: Push-up is done on the knees but full plank position is engaged once arms are fully extended for the negative.
Pull-Up	Banded pull-up: Band(s) are strung on the pull-up bar for full-range-of-motions pull-ups. To build muscle memory for kipping, the foot rather than the knee is placed in the band.
Knees-to-Elbows	Banded knees-to-elbows: A band is strung on the pull-up bar. Both feet are placed in the band with the knees on the outside of the band.
Box Jump	Scaled-height box jump: Bumper plates stacked to appropriate height (or added to boxes) for jumping.
Squat	Wall squat: Stand in front of a wall at a distance that allows for full depth to be achieved. The wall encourages a knees-out, chest-tall squat. A box or ball can be placed under butt to cue depth.
Handstand Push-Up	Handstand hold: Maintain the upside-down position for timed intervals whatever way it can be achieved. Bands can be used with the pull-up bar to help get into the position.

Jason Lyons



By getting creative with assistance gear, you can get athletes to do movements with full range of motion.

For someone starting fitness from scratch, especially those who have never been athletic, muscle memory might be missing for the simplest of movements: pushing, pulling, jumping and squatting. It is imperative to build muscle memory. Trainers can encourage clients to choose scales that do this.

Scaling for a box jump is a good example of a choice that builds muscle memory. When someone cannot do a box jump at the prescribed height, he or she could do a step-up or jump on a shorter box or stacks of bumper plates. I believe it would be better for future progress to use even one bumper plate over step-ups on a box of the prescribed height. In this case, the muscle-memory-building scale shortens the range of motion but mimics the feel of the movement.

My experience with the push-up also has proven the idea true. At first, I could barely do one knee push-up. Even after months had passed, an RX'd push-up continued to feel impossible. That changed when I read a blog post by the great CrossFit sage [Lisbeth Darsh](#).

Trainers can be creative in finding scaling strategies that build muscle memory.

"Stick with knee push-ups, and you know what you're going to get really good at? Knee push-ups. That's it. Not real push-ups. Not ring push-ups. Not even holding plank position," she wrote.

I am willing to bet most trainers would agree that there are many athletes who stay stuck on their knees or revert back to them during high-rep schemes. In Lisbeth's blog post, she suggested doing push-ups in full plank—at an incline where full range of motion is possible—at all costs. I took her advice and started using stacks of boxes instead of my knees. A short time later I did my first RX'd push-ups.

Knee push-ups might be the appropriate scaling at the start, but at some point continuing to do them might delay progress toward being able to do push-ups as prescribed. There is better scaling that allows for full range of motion in plank position and simultaneously creates the vital muscle memory as strength is acquired. These include knee push-ups that come to full plank position at the top, push-ups done in full plank position at an incline at a height that allows for full depth, or push-ups with a band. If I had to choose the best muscle-memory-building scaling, push-ups with the band would be the winner. They replicate the push-up exactly, simply removing weight so full range of motion can be performed.

Trainers can be creative in finding scaling strategies that build muscle memory. Nicole said she learned scaling is an art, not a science.

"It's something coaches should be constantly tinkering with and coming up with new ideas for," she said.

One scaling option I created is banded knees-to-elbows. During workouts with KTE, I became frustrated with my limited range of motion. By the end of the workout, I felt like I was doing nothing but hanging on the bar. Banded KTE allowed me to do the full range of motion of the movement; as a result, I get a much better workout and believe they will get me to the RX'd movement sooner.

Another way to build muscle memory is to use tactile cues in scaling.

For me, scaling with tactile cues with the squat has been transformational. I am not a natural squatter, to say the least. Part of the problem came from my limited kinesthetic awareness—the ability to sense my own body in space. I had knee surgery to repair my meniscus in April 2010. I was banned from deep squatting for four months. When I returned to it, I realized it was imperative I improve my form if I was going to get better at many other CrossFit movements.

Despite verbal cues, I continued on with a premature squat with lots of forward inclination until I was introduced to the wall squat. When doing squats facing the wall, the wall itself provides tactile cues for a tall chest, knees over toes and weight in the heels. My body finally got it. My squat has improved greatly and, in turn, so have my lifts.



Jason Lyons

Squatting facing a wall can provide a host of cues to the new athlete.

Scaling has become more than simply a substitute for movements I can't do but rather a tool for me to one day do them.

I am experimenting with a new tactile cue for double-unders. I have been tying a band around my arms when I do them to teach my body how to keep my elbows in, especially after seeing pictures of myself doing CrossFit Open WOD 11.1 and looking like I was getting prepared to take off. I plan to use this scaling during double-under workouts, and I am fully expecting it will quickly improve my form.

Someone starting fitness from scratch might be elated to perform a movement at all and think he or she is done with scaling. However, to continue to progress, tactile cues in scaling might be needed to provide external feedback, especially for those with little kinesthetic awareness. A trainer can suggest an athlete temporarily use scaling, such as a medicine ball under the butt for full depth. In my experience, it's amazing how quickly tactile cue scales build muscle memory for correct form and in turn make movements more efficient.

Coaching the Unfit for Life

Scaling has become more than simply a substitute for movements I can't do but rather a tool for me to one day do them. It doesn't matter to me if I finish the workout last because of my scaling strategies. When I scale, I scale so the movements are as difficult for me as they are for those doing them as prescribed. To their least-fit clients, trainers can reinforce that scaling is their friend and not their foe—an essential part of their success. Clients can be encouraged to accept that scaling is a process. If a scale gets too easy, it's time to find the next scale in the process toward RX'd movements.

Another important factor in my success is that I don't CrossFit to just get fitter. I CrossFit to discover the full potential of my fitness. Clients starting fitness from scratch might be just thinking it terms of losing weight and gaining some health. Trainers can encourage another idea: CrossFit can be much bigger than merely getting to a baseline of fitness. Trainers should want and expect that any client might become a firebreather. To unfit clients, the idea sounds like fantasy, but it is an ideal that will allow them to blossom into their possibilities in the gym and beyond. Coach Glassman once said, "Addressing (your weakness) will make a difference in you in ways you will never be able to predict prior to the experiment." We can never know what is possible until we test our limits and test them often.



Hande Alice

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About the Author

Stephanie Vincent began CrossFitting in September 2009. She became a Level 1 trainer in March and is interning as an assistant coach at CrossFit King of Prussia. Stephanie is pursuing training to be a professional life coach and is the author of the blog www.radicalhateloss.com. You can learn more about Stephanie's story on her blog or by listening to her interview on [CrossFit Radio Episode 156](#).

Denise Thomas, a CrossFit HQ Seminar Staff member, has my all-time favorite tattoo. It says, "What stands in the way becomes the way."

A whole lot is standing in the way when a client is starting fitness from scratch, as there was for me. But in all these obstacles lies a golden opportunity—not just in how the client's fitness can be transformed but in a trainer having the chance to be a part of changing someone's life for the better. CrossFit is truly universally scalable. Through its philosophies and community, it is unique in its ability to transform and do so quickly. I am forever changed because of it. I want my success to be replicated for as many people as possible.

Thank you to all the trainers who have been a part of my success, as well as to trainers all over the world bringing success to those who might not have experienced it otherwise.

