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Panic, Loss, Gratitude, and Sanity: The Impact of COVID-19 Gym Closures on the Experience of Community in CrossFit

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“Welcome to CrossFit: Join the World’s leading platform for health, happiness, and performance” – the CrossFit.com website advertises in bold letters. The background image features a group of athletes running, working out together, smiling. Health, happiness, and performance, all these three promises radiate not only through the wording but also the visuals on the website. But why happiness? And why CrossFit? CrossFit is a high-intensity functional fitness activity founded in California almost two decades ago and has since enjoyed an increasing popularity, in particular since the mid/late 2000s. Initially, the novelty and strenuous nature of the fitness regime (high intensity workouts, bodyweight movements paired up with some gymnastics movements and Olympic lifting) attracted its first followers¹.

Since its inception, an elaborate set of narratives have developed out of and around CrossFit. These narratives often include the ideas that CrossFit is for everyone no matter their age or physical background; that it helps achieve a general yet unrivaled level of mental toughness and physical fitness; and that CrossFit classes are expertly coached to justify the membership fees which are higher than in a commercial gym where people follow their individual routines or might hop onto one of the many classes (e.g. spin, boxercise, Zumba) commercial gyms often offer today. At the core of what makes CrossFit CrossFit is situated the idea of community and that CrossFit brings people together from all walks of life. More than that: CrossFit is perceived and imagined as a community that is not merely shaped by the temporality of the 60 minutes coached classes, but a community that extends beyond the temporal and physical confines of the box, i.e. the CrossFit gym.

CrossFit narratives seem omnipresent in the world of CrossFit. They are narrated by athletes and are part of their rationale for why they do CrossFit; they feature among CrossFit coaches in their formal and informal conversations and communications with members; they are publicized in promotional videos produced by CrossFit, as well as by commentators during live broadcasts.

If, as the CrossFit narratives stipulate, community is a central element of the CrossFit experience, what happens when athletes are being cut off from these communities due to the COVID-19 gym closure? The notion of community in CrossFit serves as starting point for the exploration of this question in this paper. From there, I discuss how CrossFit athletes and coaches have experienced the closure of CrossFit boxes (gyms) due to COVID-19 lockdowns. I have interviewed coaches and athletes and the paper is structured based on themes that emerged in my conversation: community, panic, mental health, vulnerable groups, and obesity. Insights from this study suggest that a more nuanced understanding of public health and approach to policy is needed. The CrossFit communities people were part of before box closures and the social connections they were able to forge through CrossFit during lockdowns (albeit virtually) were key factors that helped people to both keep physically fit and stay

¹ J. C. Herz, *Learning to Breathe Fire: the Rise of Crossfit and the Primal Future of Fitness*, New-York: Harmony, 2015.

mentally sane. Online *Zoom* classes some CrossFit boxes offered served as “anchor points” that helped people not only to stay physically fit but more importantly mentally sane, in particular those that were working from home, were single, or lived by themselves.

I. Methodology

This paper has been written from the perspective of someone who has done CrossFit for around eight years so far (although sometimes on an on/off basis). Throughout this time, in addition to the CrossFit box I regularly work out at, I have visited boxes in the United Kingdom, Austria, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the United States and was able to make personal connections to CrossFit coaches and athletes. I have relied on this personal network to recruit interviewees for this paper.

I interviewed two CrossFit coaches: James who coaches and is the co-owner of a CrossFit box in England; and Dave who is head coach and co-owner of a CrossFit box in Austria. I interviewed three CrossFit athletes, all of them in England: Sue who has been doing CrossFit for around eight years; Jane who is an experienced athlete having played women’s soccer for many years and who started CrossFit just short of a year before the first lockdown; and Jas who is an experienced runner and triathlete and added CrossFit post-lockdown to her sports activities. I interviewed Paul who has a long sports and coaching background and currently uses sports (football) to engage with at risk youth at a council level in England. Finally, I Jackie Hillios, Deputy Executive Director at Phoenix Multisport, a US-based organization that uses sport to support people on their journey of staying sober. All interviews, with the exception of Jackie’s, have been fully anonymized and the identity of participants remains confidential. Jackie has kindly given permission that she and her organization be named. I included Paul and Jackie because since the onset of this project, I was pondering over the question: one of the justifications for lockdowns has been to keep vulnerable groups safe, but what struggles did vulnerable groups – and those who work with them – face during lockdown?

The perspective in this paper is certainly influenced by my own CrossFit. Bringing that experience into a research project bears the risk that one’s own experience and, as is the case with CrossFit and myself, enthusiasm might prevent the researcher to recognize patterns or structures emerging in the interview data or observations². I have not included any auto-ethnographic material in this paper, but I was certainly able to relate to my interviewees through my own experiences of doing (or not doing) CrossFit during lockdowns. I deliberately avoid labeling this paper as being written from an insider perspective. Declaring one’s positionality is important, but the labels insider/outsider can often be limiting. Instead, I have tried to be aware of my positionality and the fluidity that comes with both being a researcher and being immersed in the field³. A more fluid approach “also offers a way of understanding how and why the interactions with different participants take place as they do”⁴. Since I approached my participants as a fellow CrossFitter, the interviews often had the quality of conversations in which my participants expected that I could relate to what they were talking about, and also showed a level of interest in my own experiences with CrossFit. The best way to describe the interviews is probably as an exchange between individuals with a joint interest in CrossFit. To start the interview, I invited athlete-participants to tell me why they started CrossFit. I invited my coach-participants to tell me about their first reaction when the lockdown was announced.

² Danielle Coombs, Anne Osborne, “Negotiating insider–outsider status in ethnographic sports research”, *Sport in Society*, vol. 21, n°2, 2018, p. 243-259.

³ Sonya Dwyer, Jennifer Buckle, “The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research”, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 8, n°1, 2009, p. 54-63.

⁴ Roslyn Kerr, Damion Sturm, “Moving Beyond ‘Insider or Outsider’: The Ethnographic Challenges of Researching Elite Sport Facilities in New Zealand”, *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 25, n°9-10, 2019, p. 1137-1147, p. 1145.

A close reading analysis of the interviews led to the following overarching themes used to structure this paper: community, panic, mental health, vulnerable groups, and obesity.

II. The CrossFit Community

CrossFit presents itself as more than a functional fitness regime that combines elements from bodyweight workouts, Olympic lifting, running, and various other sports. Rather, it labels itself as a “platform for health, happiness, and performance”⁵ and a “lifestyle characterized by safe, effective exercise and sound nutrition”⁶. “Community” is listed as a key aspect of CrossFit for anyone who wants to find out more about the sport: “Your support network. At thousands of affiliates around the world, people encourage and motivate each other in every class as they work toward their goals. Start training with friends. Make new friends. The fun is in the community”⁷. The talk about community, however, does not end at the website; it is, rather, woven into the fabric of CrossFit. What I mean here is that the notion of community is being woven into how CrossFit (as a brand) presents, markets, and narrates itself. For examples, official event and competition broadcasts often include inspirational stories from the broader community during breaks (e.g. during the 2021 CrossFit Games broadcast, The Phoenix was introduced which is one reason why I approached them for an interview⁸). CrossFit also regularly publishes inspirational videos to visualize how closely knit the community of a local CrossFit box can be⁹. CrossFit as a closely knit community is also often the topic of publications about CrossFit written by insiders, such as J.C. Herz’s classic and often cited *Learning to Breathe Fire*.

1. Community Attracts or Surveillance?

Community is in an important way part and parcel of the everyday lived CrossFit experience. For all interviewees, the community of the local box they belonged to and experienced was one of the main reasons they enjoyed doing CrossFit. The dynamic during the normally one-hour group workouts can contribute to the experience of enjoyment and the social bonding of athletes in CrossFit. Social interactions during a workout, such as cheering on others and being cheered on, or what Dawson¹⁰ calls “mutual surveillance”, form an integral part of the social practices within CrossFit and contribute to a sense of togetherness and belonging. Sue testified to the social bonding that happens during the workouts. She had an injury that prevented her from driving so she started an individually customized program that worked around that injury and that she could do at home in her garage: “but I did miss the class aspect of CrossFit, you know, getting to see everyone... and if you are feeling a bit knackered halfway through... people like tell you to get up and keep going.” Sue has now recovered and is continuing with her individual program. But, she says, she does not want to leave the CrossFit community: “so I really missed that, so I don’t want to totally get away from CrossFit because that’s why I love CrossFit. So, I make sure I try and go like maybe two three times a week.” It seems that these things, the cheering on, the camaraderie, contribute to the enjoyment of CrossFit. Other studies

⁵ CrossFit HQ, “CrossFit | Home”, <https://www.crossfit.com/>, 2021.

⁶ CrossFit HQ, “What Is CrossFit? », <https://www.crossfit.com/what-is-crossfit/>, 2021.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ CrossFit Games, “Wednesday: Day 1, Individual Events – 2021 NOBULL CrossFit Games”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMvZsuwJBnE>.

⁹ CrossFit Games, “64-Year-Old Patty Failla: ‘I Hope to Be the Inspiration to Others – to Know They Can Do This’”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCSog3K3c9E>. CrossFit Games, “Breona Wallin Hopes To Inspire Future Games Athletes”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLAu2DBTTa0>.

¹⁰ Marcelle Dawson, “CrossFit: Fitness cult or reinventive institution?”, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 52, n°3, 2017, p. 361-379, p. 375.

confirm this sentiment. For example, Fisher *et al.*¹¹ (2017) found that CrossFit members reported higher levels of intrinsic motivation for participating in the sport, in particular enjoyment and affiliation, compared to other group-based forms of resistance training or exercising alone. Yet, Whiteman-Sandland *et al.*¹² argue that the impact of a sense of belonging on gym attendance is still underexplored.

2. CrossFit and/or/versus Traditional Gyms

Experiences with and in traditional gyms are a reoccurring element in stories about the CrossFit community, often by way of comparison – or better juxtaposition. Some men raise the commercial environment (and lack of value for money) of traditional gyms as issue while some women note a commercial gym's "hostile" workout environment¹³. A hostile environment, however, is not the only reason for people to leave a commercial gym environment. Rather, people have a diverse range of reasons for preferring CrossFit classes over traditional gyms and the classes they offer. Jane tried various coached group classes at traditional gyms but usually stopped after about a couple of months or so because of boredom. In fact, when she tried CrossFit, she "wasn't even sure I liked it for the first couple of months". When asked what made her change her mind, she responded: "I just started to really enjoy it. I think it's just the people are really nice and the fact that everything is different. Because you get a bit bored in the gym because it's really repetitive." She explained that she did spinning classes where she did see the same people on a regular basis and chatted with them, but with CrossFit "it is different, I don't really know how or why but it is". What Jane is telling us here overlaps with Dave's experience as box owner. I asked him whether the classes that the fitness chains in his area are offering are a competition or had a negative impact on the membership of his box. He was quick to respond: "Absolutely not." Initially, he said, he was worried, especially when the chains started offering functional fitness classes. "But we are coming back to one point: even if an athlete can do everything [in the layout and the equipment some fitness chains offer for functional fitness], it's just not the same than doing it here with us at the box."

A positive outlook and mindset, a positive mentality, good attitude, and shared interests contribute to what attracts people to CrossFit according to Jas and Sue. Jane has similar thoughts: "the majority of people at CrossFit have that growth mindset, that self-improvement type of thing and I think you talk more because there are these social bits as well. And I love the fact that they do the charity events", Jane said. Jas mentioned a shared language: "you talk the same geekiness, the same language, the same things, that maybe outside people just don't understand." In other words, CrossFit becomes part and parcel of identity negotiations throughout which people form or join new communities and leave old communities behind. As such, what happens in the box spills over and bleeds into the everyday and vice versa. The dynamics in the box, the new relationships that are being formed change the dynamics of relationships outside the box. Dawson¹⁴ critically explores these identity negotiations and argues, "for instance, the adoption of a CrossFit identity seems to hamper the ability to interact with others who do not share this identity". It is important here not to single out CrossFit but compare CrossFit with other sports that evolve around a community and to look at not only what happens during but before and after class, too. Jane, for example, said she experiences a

¹¹ James Fisher, Adele Sales, Luke Carlson, James Steele, "A comparison of the motivational factors between CrossFit participants and other resistance exercise modalities: a pilot study", *The Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness*, vol. 57, n°9, 2017, p. 1227-1234.

¹² Jessica Whiteman-Sandland, Jemma Hawkins, Debbie Clayton, "The role of social capital and community belongingness for exercise adherence: An exploratory study of the CrossFit gym model", *Journal of Health Psychology*, vol. 23, n°12, 2018, p. 1545-1556.

¹³ Shaun Edmonds, "Geographies of (Cross)fitness: an ethnographic case study of a CrossFit Box", *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, vol. 12, n°2, 2020, p. 192-206.

¹⁴ M. Dawson, "CrossFit: Fitness cult or reinventive institution?", *art. cit.*, p. 374.

similar kind of camaraderie and teamwork in CrossFit that she was used to from playing soccer. It seems that CrossFit is experienced as different from commercial gyms but that CrossFit shares a number of characteristics with other group and community based sports.

The bodily look of CrossFit athletes, too, attracts male and female athletes. Dave explained that initially, in the first couple of years or so of opening his box, the physique of CrossFitters contributed to the interest in CrossFit: “people saw that folks that do CrossFit look pretty good naked, that’s what I want, too, and that’s what prompted some to try it out.” The perception of physique was also important for Jas: “Years ago, physique was all about being really slim. Now, there’s definitely a desire to be strong within women now, and I think CrossFit gives you both of that [being lean and building muscle] ...I think there’s a mentality within society now for women about strong is good rather than skinny.” This positive attitude equally resonated with Jane who explained that “the focus is more about what you can do than what your body looks like, that’s really really refreshing”. While some women, such as Jas and Jane appreciated the focus on strength and “can do”, some women may find that this creates an ideal of what a strong female body ought to look like, and ideal which might be equally problematic¹⁵.

CrossFit can also be characterized as forms of economic transactions. CrossFit is an economic community, i.e. a community that is shaped by the idea of value for money, purchase power, and purchase commitment. With “economic community”, I do not mean to disregard the genuine connections people are forming that spill over into everyday life. Rather, economic relationships contribute to the community dynamics and the buy-in from CrossFit athletes. Compared to commercial gyms, CrossFit boxes charge significantly higher monthly membership fees. This higher membership fee comes with the promise of value for money, high quality coaching, and access to coaches who participants feel care for them¹⁶. Higher membership fees change the dynamic of participation, attendance, commitment, and perceived value. “In effect, members of the Box are not only purchasing the WOD and Coaches, they are also purchasing the relationships and sociality found within the Box. In turn, members are producing the experience of sociality that other members are purchasing. In this way, CrossFit members are both producers and consumers of the labor required to maintain the place of the Box.¹⁷” This, however, is not a one-sided relationship or transaction but a mutual one between athletes and coaches. When contemplating the impact had he had to shut down his box due to COVID-19, Dave explained: “you do have a certain kind of responsibility. Even though they are your customers, truth be told they are not ‘just’ customers. We’ve got people training with us today who have been with us since our beginning some eight years or so ago. They aren’t strangers!”

Several studies include community and a sense of belonging as motivations why people do CrossFit rather than other forms of resistance training¹⁸. But “more studies are needed on the relationship between CrossFit and psychological health”¹⁹, in particular in the context of COVID-19, lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, and mandatory self-isolation requirements.

Given the prominence of and emphasis on community in CrossFit, what happens when national lockdowns are announced that mandate gym closures? How did CrossFit boxes react and how did athlete experience being cut off from their like-minded fitness community and their network of fitness-friends?

¹⁵ Miranda Podmore, Jennifer Ogle, “The lived experience of CrossFit as a context for the development of women’s body image and appearance management practices”, *Fashion and Textiles*, vol. 5, n°1, p. 1-23.

¹⁶ S. Edmonds, “Geographies of (Cross)fitness”, *art. cit.*, p. 199.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁸ Fabio Dominski, Thiago Serafim, Thais Siqueira, Alexandro Andrade, “Psychological variables of CrossFit participants: a systematic review”, *Sport Sciences for Health*, vol. 17, n°1, 2021, p. 21-41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

III. COVID-19 Lockdown: “But yeah, just a big panic”

COVID-19 stay-at-home orders cut athletes off from the box as physical space that serves multiple purposes. The box is more than just a space where athletes train their bodies. It is the space where athletes suffer through challenging workouts together. It is also the space where athletes form social relationships, sustain and renew them every time they walk into the box. The box as multi-purpose space, as space of everyday fitness, and the imaginations associated with the box remain underexplored.²⁰ Through the often raw, industrial looking, and empty spaces, spaces that lack labelled gendered spaces (e.g. Ladies’ gym), CrossFit “positions itself within the fitness industry as a rebuttal of the modern commercial gym²¹” and athletes often buy into this “nostalgic reimagining of physical activity that has no direct historical point of origin but instead derives from affective and ideological rejection of contemporary society²²”. In a way, this is an internally contradictory position where athletes need a particular financial background afforded to them by contemporary economic culture to be able to afford the higher membership fees to then reject aspects of that very economic culture.

Access to the multi-dimensional space of the box suddenly changed when governments announced gym closures. Coach James in the UK describes his initial reaction explicitly as a sense of panic: “when they said gyms are closing my initial reaction was: shit, that’s our business closed, where is money going to come from, because I knew we’d still have bills to pay. But yeah, just a big panic.” During this initial state of panic, he appreciated the community he built at his local box because people started checking in with him and each other: “and then, when it happened, I got bombarded with text messages from members saying: are you all right? Is there anything we can do?” He also knew that he had to do something for his members so his box went online using *Zoom* within a couple of days.

Coach Dave’s reaction was slightly different from James’ because political messaging in Austria created the expectation that lockdowns would only last a couple of weeks to flatten the curve. Eventually, however, the lockdown lasted from March until early May. In Dave’s recollection, the first lockdown felt differently from the second, not only because the second one meant closure for over six months. More importantly, the first lockdown happened in spring, brought warm weather, and the Austrian government allowed outdoor training after about a month. With the initial messaging of a short (first) lockdown, Dave was not overly worried about his business. While he did not offer any *Zoom* workouts during the first lockdown, his business partner was already running an online training app which they quickly adapted for their CrossFit programming. During the second lockdown, however, Dave’s box started offering *Zoom* classes because “we knew we couldn’t just do what we did for the first lockdown. And our members also said that they are really struggling to exercise by themselves”.

Athletes, too, expressed a sense of uncertainty over what might happen and a sense of struggle. When the lockdown was announced, Sue remembered thinking: “Oh my God, I’m going to get really fat and unhealthy and I’m not going to see anyone ... everything was so scary, but I think that was the main thing for me. I was really upset about the pubs being closed [laughs] and the restaurants because I had lots of things booked. But then, when the gyms closed, I was like: Oh my God, I need the gym because if I don’t go to the gym, I feel like crap all day. It’s a good meeting place. Like a lot of my friends now I’ve met at CrossFit.”

Coach James pointed out that his members thought – and worried – about post-lockdown scenarios right at the start of the first lockdown: “because it is a small community, everyone knows us, and we know everyone who comes. They all said: we want it all to still be here when we come back.” A majority his members continued paying their membership fees, “especially

²⁰ S. Edmonds, “Geographies of (Cross)fitness”, *art. cit.*, p. 192.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 198.

those that got equipment off us or were doing the *Zoom* classes, I think they were happy to keep paying”. James found this post-lockdown outlook quite reassuring. This outlook also fits into the understanding of the CrossFit community as an economic community discussed earlier where coaches and members mutually build relationships and contribute to the community. Post-lockdown scenarios were on Coach Dave’s mind, too. Based on conversations he had with his members during lockdown, he contemplated the impact if his box had had to permanently close: “it would really be shitty if we didn’t exist anymore. It really would be a problem for them [his members].”

IV. Mental Health

Physical activity is generally associated with improved well-being and mental health. Yet, their relationship is complex and complicated. What type of physical activity at what exhaustion and strain levels is still subject to debate²³. Several studies have established a strong link between spending time outdoors and emotional and mental health and wellbeing. Being outdoors, in this context, included activities such as going for a walk as well as the opportunity to escape one’s indoor (social) settings.²⁴ The picture is less clear when it comes to high intensity exercise because of limited data and existing study paint a complicated picture²⁵. In Köteles *et al.*’s study²⁶ on the psychological effects of cross training, participants mentioned well-being as a motivation for doing CrossFit, yet the study authors did not find a significant link between exercise frequency and well-being. Other studies, however, did find that CrossFit had a positive impact on both physical as well as mental health and well-being²⁷. Changes in exercise behavior from before to during COVID-19 lockdowns also seemed to impact individual’s well-being. Individuals, for example, who maintained or increased their levels of physical activities during restrictions compared to before COVID-19 also maintained or increased their mental well-being. Individuals whose level of physical activity dropped also saw their mental well-being drop²⁸.

1. “It’s going to be ok”

Coaches James and Dave told me that their members approached them to appreciate their efforts to keep people fit and engaged throughout lockdowns. Both coaches got approached by some members to tell them that their lockdown programming and *Zoom* classes had a positive impact on their mental health. It is surprising that both coaches shared this experience because the public debate on and coverage of mental health was less prominent in Austria compared to the UK. While UK media frequently covered mental health issues (e.g. *The Guardian*), Dave told me he does not really remember Austrian news covering the impact of lockdown on mental health in any significant way. This correlates with my own observations having read both UK (*The Guardian* and *BBC*) and Austrian news (*Der Standard* and *ORF*) throughout that time. A

²³ Ferenc Köteles, Maria Kollsete, Hannah Kollsete, “Psychological Concomitants of Crossfit Training: Does More Exercise Really Make Your Everyday Psychological Functioning Better?”, *Kinesiology*, vol. 48, n°1, 2016, p. 39-48. Glen Duncan, Ally Avery, Edmund Seto, Siny Tsang, “Perceived change in physical activity levels and mental health during COVID-19: Findings among adult twin pairs”, *PLOS ONE*, vol. 15, n°8, 2020.

²⁴ Stefan Stieger, David Lewetz, Viren Swami, “Emotional Well-Being Under Conditions of Lockdown: An Experience Sampling Study in Austria During the COVID-19 Pandemic”, *Journal of Happiness Studies*, vol. 22, n°6, 2021, p. 2703-2720.

²⁵ Allyson Box *et al.*, “High Intensity Functional Training (HIFT) and competitions: How motives differ by length of participation”, *PLOS ONE*, vol. 14, n°3, 2019.

²⁶ Köteles *et al.*, “Psychological Concomitants of Crossfit Training”, *art. cit.*, p. 43f.

²⁷ Shelby Lautner *et al.*, “Exploring the social side of CrossFit: a qualitative study”, *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*, vol. 25, n°1, 2021, p. 63-75.

²⁸ James Faulkner *et al.*, “Physical activity, mental health and well-being of adults during initial COVID-19 containment strategies: A multi-country cross-sectional analysis”, *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, vol. 24, n°4, 2021, p. 320-326.

quick search in the archive of Der Standard, an Austrian newspaper, for “psychische Gesundheit lockdown” for the period of 1 March 2020 – 1 May 2021 brings 59 hits. It would be valuable – but outside the scope of this paper – to further explore public discussions on and coverage of mental health and COVID-19 in Austria.

Sue and Jane voiced how exercise helped them keep sane and that they enjoyed the banter before and after class. Both found it helpful to see familiar and like-minded people on screen and appreciated the opportunity to work out with others, albeit virtually. Jane remembered: “the box did home workouts from the next day ... And then Martha [another CrossFit member] sent me a hideous workout through and I got that done and I thought: right, exercise is going to keep me sane, it’s going to be fine.” But what exactly prompted Jane to say “it’s going to be fine”; the comradery or the exercise itself? For Jane, it was predominantly exercise: “it’s definitely exercise for me. I think when you are in situations where life is less than ideal and you’ve got a lot to juggle, the later in the day you leave training, the more things that can happen that can take that time. So, for me, I know that if I train, I feel better.” Jane has been very active and played sports all her life, which might explain that she pointed to exercise right away. She did miss the gym environment during lockdowns but the routine of being able to join an early morning *Zoom* class “really helped”. Jane’s experience resonates with study findings about the benefit of regular patterns. Matias *et al.*²⁹, for example, argue that “a daily exercise routine can be crucial to modulating pleasurable situations at some point during the day”. Doing so, “exercise offers the capability to reset body and mind to a state of equilibrium³⁰”. But it was more than just the routine: Jane told me that she did enjoy the chats before and after class. It seems, the social element of live classes added to the perceived value of the routine.

Jas’ journey with CrossFit only began after lockdown, but as experienced runner and triathlete, she, too, testified to the value exercise provided her with during lockdown. “Lockdown didn’t stop me from my daily exercise”, Jas explained. Reflecting on what she learned from lockdown and exercising during lockdown, Jas said: “I think I’ve always known the connection between my mental health and exercise, but I think I now see the connection between my mental health, exercise, and being part of a group.”

Jas, who was not a CrossFit member at the time of lockdown, yet kept up with regular exercise raises important questions: What opportunities, if any at all, did online live coached classes offer? Would it not have been more convenient for people to join one of the many apps that were released throughout lockdown with on-demand classes, such as Apple Fitness+, Les Mills+, Nike Training, to name just a few? What was the perceived benefit – if any at all – of live online coached classes over outdoor exercise alone and spending time in the fresh air alone? This last question is of particular importance because studies suggest that being able to go and spend time outdoors is key to well-being³¹.

2. “That Little Green Dot”: Surveillance or Encouragement and Community?

All the CrossFit interviewees commented on the value of the social element of live classes, often visualized through the presence of the little green dot on one’s screen. Sue, for example, testified to both the importance of exercise as well as the importance of community. In fact, she was quite positive about the lockdown and said she loved CrossFit during lockdown: “I think if it hadn’t been for that, I think, I would have hated lockdown and maybe gone on a bit of a downer myself. Gone a little bit down on myself. Because work was horrible at the time and just going in there [*Zoom* classes], it’s like a release. And it would have been very different

²⁹ Thiago Matias, Fabio Dominski, David Marks, “Human needs in COVID-19 isolation”, *Journal of Health Psychology*, vol. 25, n°7, 2020, p. 877.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 876.

³¹ S. Stieger *et al.*, “Emotional Well-Being Under Conditions of Lockdown”, *art. cit.*, p. 2704.

going in there and not doing it on camera because it's knowing there is other people there. This makes such a difference.” Sue and Jane pushed the social element of online classes further and framed them as a space that opened up new opportunities for keeping themselves entertained with “stupid little things”, as Sue would call it. These silly things included various forms of challenges such as push-up challenges. This resonates with Matias’ *et al.*³² findings that “in the face of this pandemic, we have seen many examples across the world showing that exercise can create a social arena in which individuals learn social skills and build social networks by adhering to exercise challenges, exercising in condominiums and encouraging others. These virtual social connections enhance feelings of autonomy and being fully alive”.

Moving online also provided Sue and Jane with new opportunities for outdoor activities and forming new social connections. For Jane, lockdown provided her with an opportunity to get to know Martha a bit better. They met at the box before lockdown and chatted about their kids who are of similar age, but they had not really socialized outside the box before lockdown. Once outdoor exercise in small groups and bubbles was allowed, they started exercising together: “I stopped hating running during lockdown because Martha was like, can I please have some adult company? Can we go for a jog together? So, me and Martha would start doing a little jogging together.”

Coaches James and Dave reported that the longer lockdowns lasted, the more prominent the social element of the *Zoom* classes became. Typically, a one-hour CrossFit class (in the box or online) starts with a warm-up, stretching, skills or strength work, followed by the WOD, the Workout of the Day. Both coaches observed that the longer the lockdown, the longer the chatting and banter became. Coach James’ box was offering several classes throughout the day. In particular on the lunchtime and evening classes, people would just chat for the first 15-20 minutes before the class moved on to the warmup. Coach Dave, whose box offered one online class a day, made similar observations. His members repeatedly voiced that they were grateful he offered live classes. Dave added: “in particular those who were working from home, who live alone, who are single, they got up at 8 in the morning and didn’t see any faces all day ... People told us that this was really tough, because, what do you do? They were grateful. It actually took me a bit by surprise how grateful people were that they had this one hour, this anchor point, where you get to see other people, your friends, your coach. We had some members who joined the *Zoom* classes simply so they would see people, who weren’t overly bothered about exercising anymore. I think, this hasn’t received enough attention, especially from those that couldn’t relate to these experiences.”

Coach Dave’s idea that *Zoom* class can serve as an “anchor point”, raises an important point: different people have different physical and psychological needs which can manifest themselves in diverse ways. With the lack of understanding, he referred to both policy makers as well as the general population who might not exercise on a regular basis or might have a different understanding of leisure time. To illustrate what he means, Dave mentioned people’s different ideas of and approaches to relaxing and de-stressing. Doing CrossFit, coming to the box, Dave said, “isn’t like a lay person might think about it, bodybuilding, or getting a pump, or ‘just’ sports. For many, gym and exercising are a form of therapy, downtime, a time out, it’s a social hour where people form connections [...] But if someone isn’t into exercising or the gym, they can’t really relate to that. When I try to explain this to someone whose idea of resting, relaxing, finding a balance is to lie at a pool in a spa for a couple of hours, that person won’t understand that someone might find it exciting and really cool that someone [the coach] is yelling at him with loud music playing in the background. If I try to explain that to someone who can’t relate, that person thinks I’m from a different universe.” Dave’s observations highlight two things: the importance of a more holistic understanding of sport in policy making

³² T. Matias *et al.*, “Human needs in COVID-19 isolation”, *art. cit.*, p. 878.

as well as in discussions around public health; and the value of social networks that emerge from participating in sports. Matias *et al.*³³ suggest “that people in social isolation should try to create peer support through social networking services by involving friends and relatives in their exercise routines or challenges”. As interviewees for this paper highlighted, people who participate in forms of exercise where community is part of the experience, such as CrossFit, seem at an advantage because they have pre-existing networks they can draw on in times of a public health crisis or drastic measures such as a lockdown.

Zoom classes, however, with their watchful green dot raise the question of the gaze. Who is watching whom, what is the impact of watching and being watched on camera, and how does the online experience differ from the in-box experience? In CrossFit boxes, the lack of mirrors might turn the participants’ attention to the coach leading the class³⁴. Does the green dot replicate the in-box experience or does it add a stressor and a sense of unease? The conversations with participants showed that it depends. Neither Jane nor Sue were bothered by the camera. “It wasn’t an issue, being watched, I like it because I think that’s probably why CrossFit is different. Some of the workouts are so awful that surviving that workout, it bonds you to the person in the class”. Sue agreed: “usually, that would bother me, but it actually didn’t because when you looked at everyone else, I usually did it on my iPhone or iPad, you were quite small. They couldn’t see that well. And most people would have the coach on [...]. You can turn your camera off so they can’t see you, or if you’re doing it in a couple of different areas. Sometimes, you’d only see the top of your head doing a burpee.”

While Sue was not bothered by the gaze of the camera, she was aware that some people did not want to join the *Zoom* sessions because they didn’t want to be watched. “But they could have just left their cameras off”, Sue said, and the coaches at her box were really good about people not turning on their cameras. They tried to encourage their members to join the *Zoom* classes and made it really clear that no one should feel obliged to turn their cameras on. Coach James made a similar experience and said that some members had their cameras on at the start for the chat and the banter but then turned them off for the actual workout started. Coach Dave’s experience seems slightly different and the vast majority of his members left their camera on during the workout. “I think for those that joined us for the *Zoom* classes, it was really important that someone was watching. I think they actually needed that little green dot because otherwise, they’d be completely by themselves. They had the option to do all the workouts independently if they wanted, because we filmed short explainer videos and typed up the workouts in great detail ... Those that regularly joined us for the *Zoom* classes, they wanted it that way. And they often didn’t do any other exercises outside of the *Zoom* class. So, if someone didn’t have time to join our *Zoom* class, they skipped training on that day. They couldn’t imagine doing the workout by themselves, alone, in their garage or their basement, without anyone watching them.” Dave continued that the little green dot is not just about the question of being seen. For some, Dave explained, the little green dot was a reminder that they are not exercising alone. Even though they could not see other participants too well due to the screen estate, even though the green dot could not quite replicate the in-box experience of working out and suffering through a workout next to someone else, it was about knowing they were not by themselves, alone.

Regular exercise habits before lockdowns seem to have provided athletes with a good foundation to continue these habits throughout lockdown. In Redwood-Brown *et al.*’s study³⁵ that generated survey data from around 2.000 CrossFit athletes (predominantly from England)

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ S. Edmonds, “Geographies of (Cross)fitness”, *art. cit.*, p. 197.

³⁵ Athalie Redwood-Brown, Grant Ralston, Jennifer Wilson, “Incidence, severity and perceived susceptibility of COVID-19 in the UK CrossFit population”, *BMC Sports Science, Medicine and Rehabilitation*, vol. 13, n°1, 2021, p. 106.

in May and June 2020, over 50% of respondents did not report any changes to their mental health. Over 45% of participants reported to have engaged in regular exercise during lockdown. My interview data supplements studies like Redwood-Brown et al.'s for two reasons: survey data in that particular study was gathered towards the end of the first lockdown. At that point, less than 1% of survey participants reported having tested positive for COVID-19 and less than 10% thought they might have been infected with COVID-19. Redwood-Brown *et al.*³⁶ conclude: "our sample population reported few changes to habitual exercise during the induced lockdown, which may be due to the community and increased adherence associated with CrossFit." My interview data, indeed, suggests that the emphasis on community not only kept CrossFit athletes engaged in regular exercise, but that both exercise and community had a positive impact on people's mental health.

V. Vulnerable Populations: Loss and Opportunities, and Lost Opportunities

The COVID-19 related box closures brought both challenges and opportunities for people who might be vulnerable or at risk. For example, for people who are part of a fitness-based support network in their journey of recovery from addiction, the box closures meant a sudden and lengthy loss of access to the gym as safe space and the consistency face-to-face meetings provided. Within the CrossFit community, several initiatives exist that harness the sense of belonging to a community to address questions of inclusion, exclusion, to teach adolescents social skills, to support people on their recovery journey and help them become more resilient. One fairly well-known initiative is the organization Youth Resilience (formerly Steve's Club) which works with disenfranchised, disadvantaged, underserved, or at-risk youths. The Phoenix (thephoenix.org) is another example of such an initiative. The Phoenix defines itself as a sober active community and supports people on their journey of recovery from addiction. The organization can also be considered fairly well-known because it was featured in the 2021 CrossFit Games live broadcasts³⁷. For the purposes of this paper, I have contacted The Phoenix and they kindly agreed to an interview.

Lockdowns, however, were also a lost opportunity for broader conversations about lifestyle changes, lifestyle choices, and "public health". Any conversations about "public health" also need to include conversations about risks to people, young people and adults, who have to stay home in an abusive home environment, or a domestic violence relationship and have little opportunities to escape, as Paul highlighted. What is the harm inflicted on them, how do they recover from that harm, and what support is available?

1. Supporting People in Recovery

The Phoenix, as a sober active community, offers a range of activities from CrossFit to hiking, yoga, cycling, rock climbing as well as various social events. They try to harness the power of community which is why they have partnered with a number of CrossFit boxes in the US: it is this "natural inclination of CrossFit towards community", Jacki tells me. When The Phoenix first approached CrossFit boxes, they were surprised how quickly these boxes welcomed them. When offering them to pay for their gym space, Jacki said, "all of them said: absolutely not. We don't want your money. Not only do we volunteer our gyms, but our coaches too, we're happy to help [...]. So, it was this remarkable welcoming into the CrossFit family."

Box closures brought challenges – but also opportunities – for The Phoenix's members. Jacki did describe the lockdown as "tragic": "there were a lot of people who were separated from what they needed. Not just the fitness element like the CrossFit community, but for us they were separated from their recovery communities." Jacki pushed the experience of separation

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁷ CrossFit Games, "Wednesday: Day 1, Individual Events – 2021 NOBULL CrossFit Games", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMvZsuwJBnE>.

further using the word “displaced”: “There were a lot of folks who were truly displaced from our in-person programs”. The notions of being separated and displacement from one’s recovery community requires further investigation. Firstly, people were affected differently by lockdowns. In Smith *et al.*’s study³⁸, more than half of the study participants struggled during lockdown and reported loneliness and mental health issues. Others appreciated the lack of exposure to public alcohol consumption, found the period of isolation peaceful, and found they had more time to connect (albeit virtually) with friends and family. In particular those who were already living in relative isolation before lockdown seemed to struggle less with stay-at-home orders. Secondly, recovery services in general were struggling to offer support during lockdown. Online meetings an increasing number of organizations started to offer were able to mitigate against these challenges to some extent³⁹. They led to more flexibility of offers for service users, but access to practitioners (such as physicians or psychologists) remained often challenging⁴⁰.

The Phoenix was able to take their operations online within just a few days of lockdown announcements, Jacki told me. At that time, they were already working on online offerings which allowed them to adapt to gym closures fairly quickly. This opened new opportunities for The Phoenix and they were “able to reach a market of people we couldn’t have reached prior to that. And what we also found is that people were bringing their families. So, we would have these CrossFit classes where a young man was bringing his dad for the first time. They lived in different States and couldn’t connect with each other physically [...]. And similarly, we had moms and grandmas and cousins and brothers and sisters and kids, it was, just frankly kind of a remarkable shift where we thought community and connection was going to be really impaired. But we found that it actually bridged communities and actually made families strong.”

All the positive opportunities for bringing people together that were otherwise geographically separated, however, “did not take away the sting of the in-person loss”. That loss Jacki speaks of is not merely the opportunity to like-minded and supportive people, but it is also linked to the experience of the physical space of the gym as safe space. When partnering with a gym, The Phoenix wants to provide people in recovery with a safe space for their journey. For example, they ask partnering gyms to not have beer fridges in their facilities and ask members of these facilities to not talk about “how they went out on Friday night and got loaded. And you know had a hangover”. For some people, having such a safe space and being able to go to such a safe space, was what they needed for their recovery. “So, to be able to come to an environment where it’s safe because you’re not going to be triggered by all kinds of things that... you know, you maybe want to go back and use again and they’ve got people around them who understand how to create an environment that’s also emotionally safe. It just makes a place where they can go and just be.” The number of people flocking back to the boxes as soon as The Phoenix was able to resume in-person classes demonstrated the importance of a safe – physical – space for people in recovery. “We were maxed out more often than not”, Jacki remembers, “we had to switch to a registration system so that we could contain the number of people because of COVID requirements. And so, we were constantly adding more programs because we needed to make more space for people.”

³⁸ Emma Smith, Melody Carter, Elaine Walklet, Paul Hazell, “Investigating the experiences of individuals in recovery from problem substance use and their perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic”, *Drugs and Alcohol Today*, 2021.

³⁹ Brandon Bergman, John Kelly, Maurizio Fava, Eden Evins, “Online recovery support meetings can help mitigate the public health consequences of COVID-19 for individuals with substance use disorder”, 2021, *Addictive Behaviors*, vol. 113, p. 106661.

⁴⁰ Adriana del Palacio-Gonzalez, Birgitte Thylstrup, Esben Houborg, “The impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on services for substance use in Denmark: Implications for meeting users’ needs and recommendations for the future”, 2022, *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

Jacki's observations of the gym as a safe space link to the discussion earlier that more attention needs to be paid to gyms not as elite sports spaces but as spaces in which everyday life happens. Jacki's observations also link to Coach Dave's comments that people without gym experience might not be able to relate to the importance of the box as a safe space, a space to destress and mentally recover, a space where everyday life with all its ups and downs happens. It is the "everyday" that can elevate the box from a space people merely go to for a sweaty workout into a space in which life happens, that provides a safe space, a form of refuge, is therapeutic, that is a space for friendships and social connections to be formed and lived.

2. Obesity

Vulnerable populations and people with higher risk factors for severe COVID-19 symptoms have often been failed by policy decisions. Many opportunities have been missed to address lifestyle issues that might put individuals more at risk and a more holistic approach to "keeping people safe" seems to be needed. Dave thought that the debates around the understanding of "health" in public health was one-dimensional and inadequate. "For whatever reason," Dave told me, quite annoyed, "McDonald's was allowed to open before us. That was really difficult for me to comprehend and I still get really annoyed about it. McDonald's is allowed to open and then people queue for an hour and a half at McDrive, at fucking McDonald's. That is insanity. Everything you hear in the media is just about staying at home, isolating, alone. But there is no discussion on what people could do to reduce risks factors... so you don't have to worry when you go to the grocery store to buy bananas. This would have been such a great opportunity to talk about things like: what is vitamin D? What does a healthy diet look like? And maybe it's not the worst thing for some to lose 5kg of bodyweight. No one addressed these issues. All you hear is: health crisis. And then you open up McDonald's. We often hear that people who are overweight are more at risk than someone who is reasonably fit. But you take away all the opportunities for people to be physically active, you lock them in. But then we open up McDonald's. And they sit in their car for an hour and a half for their fucking burger. That's insanity!"

Dave's strong sentiments resonate with recent study findings that suggest that obesity can render people more susceptible to COVID-19. In their pre-print (not peer-reviewed yet) study, Martínez-Colón *et al.*⁴¹ found that SARS-CoV-2 can target adipose tissue and induce inflammatory responses. This might help explain why obesity is one of the risk factors for more severe COVID-19 symptoms. It seems that COVID-19 prevention and mitigation strategies need to be more holistic and should include activity and movement campaigns as well as healthy diet campaigns⁴².

VI. Concluding Thoughts

Sports that facilitate – in one way or the other – the formation of social networks can provide a supportive environment in times of public crises and government mandated periods of isolation. While the conversations I had for the purposes of this paper are in no way representative of the diverse experiences of people, they do provide an insight into what happened when people were confined to private spaces. The experiences of coaches, a youth worker, and of the organization The Phoenix were supplemented with the experiences of three CrossFit athletes. A lot of people experienced the closure of fitness spaces, CrossFit boxes in the context of this paper, as a loss. Lockdowns have disrupted people's routines that helped

⁴¹ Giovanni J. Martínez-Colón *et al.*, "SARS-CoV-2 infects human adipose tissue and elicits an inflammatory response consistent with severe COVID-19". *Immunology*. Preprint.

⁴² Fabio Dominski, Ricardo Brandt, "Do the benefits of exercise in indoor and outdoor environments during the COVID-19 pandemic outweigh the risks of infection?", 2020, *Sport Sciences for Health*, vol. 16, n°3, p. 583-588.

them to keep fit, in shape, and sane. More importantly, lockdowns endangered people's access to their social network, their network of friends, and their support networks.

The physical isolation helped flatten the COVID-19 curve, but brought significant challenges to people's mental health, in particular people who were working from home, lived by themselves, or were single. The intimate context of the CrossFit box with relatively small membership numbers compared to a commercial gym helped address some of these challenges. As Coach Dave pointed out, his members are not merely customers, people know each other and there exists a mutual relationship between him and his members. As Coach James as well as Sue and Jane pointed out, people started checking in with each other. Throughout lockdowns, some social connections and ties became stronger through the joint interest in fitness. Some CrossFit boxes facilitated both fitness and social connections. In other words: the *Zoom* classes some CrossFit boxes offered served a double purpose. They provided athletes with motivation, a routine, and a framework to keep fit. These athletes were in a strong position to address some of the COVID-19 risk factors. It also provided athletes with a space to meet people and have adult conversations. Fitness worked hand-in-hand with the social connections that *Zoom* classes enabled to help keep people mentally sane. Both coaches were approached by some of their members to express their gratitude for providing time and space to socialize and to keep physically and mentally fit and sane. Jas testified to the importance of both fitness and community for her mental health. Sue's and Jane's comments showed that some individuals leaned more towards the fitness aspect for their sanity and mental health, others more towards the community aspect. Coach Dave offered a valuable insight: with Austria's prolonged lockdown that kept gyms closed for over half a year, some of his members joined the *Zoom* classes for the sole purpose of socializing.

The provision of a supportive virtual environment was particularly important for people who were on a journey of recovery at the time of lockdown. The virtual allowed for new opportunities and connections, but, as Jacki said, did not fully take away the loss of access to physical spaces and in-person communities.

In my conversations, gender was not a prominent issue, with the exception of Paul. When asked, James thought that his members' engagement was overall fairly balanced. Dave's box leaned more towards women's engagement, but his box's membership was also made up of slightly more women. Sue and Jane told me about expanding friendship circles and outdoor workouts that were organized, and most of these featured a female majority. It would have been interesting to supplement my interview data with male athletes but this can be the topic of a future paper. Coach Dave commented on male and female engagement, though: a number of his male members were missing the heavy weights during lockdown, but his male members also have a tendency to prefer the CrossFit workouts that involve heavier weights during in-box classes, too. Paul painted a different picture, but most likely for different reasons. The majority of youth in his programs are male, but he and his team are actively working on getting more female youth involved. The current gender mix might be due to perceptions and stereotypes around sports as well as the complicated relationship between youth, gender, risk, and anti-social behavior⁴³.

Some members, as Coach James and Coach Dave reported, struggled to engage with online training and as follow up study, it would be valuable to interview members who did not engage at all with their local box during lockdown. One of the interviewees noted that she noticed an ever so slight sense of resignation among some of her friends that struggled to engage online. This is a crucial point and demonstrates how sport and community can jointly act together to help with people's health and well-being. All the interviewees reported a sense of

⁴³ Divera Twisk, Teresa Senserrick, "Risky road behaviours cluster and share predictor variables with smoking and drinking, and anti-social behaviours during early adolescence", *Journal of Transport & Health*, vol. 20, 2021.

accomplishment, a sense of feeling better, physically and mentally, after having done the daily workout. Online classes could not fully replace the in-box experience but they served as “anchor points” for athletes’ physical fitness and mental sanity. As such, some CrossFit boxes provided an essential function for people’s physical and mental well-being during a public health crisis.