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Favela Fitness

Residents in Rio de Janeiro's Rocinha favela use CrossFit to rise above poverty and violence.

By **Chris Clark** CrossFit Rocinha

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All photos courtesy of Chris Clark/Rocinha CrossFit

I woke up to the heavy thumping of a military helicopter circling, diving and banking hard to avoid the gunfire from the ground. I ran to my window, small and square with bars, and I could see it all when I was standing on my toes.

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Rocinha, perhaps Rio de Janeiro's most famous favela (slum), lies like a beast carved into the cradle of the Rio de Janeiro mountains, standing guard forever over the ultra-rich penthouses sprawling and spilling toward the Atlantic Ocean. Rocinha is governed by drug traffickers, and the police enter only on raids with elite troops and helicopters. The heartbeat of Rocinha is loud and never stops—300,000 favelados (slum residents) shouting, dancing and surviving with style. I can never claim to be one of them, but that morning, after three months living in the favela, I felt it ...

On the Rooftops of Rocinha

One year ago, I had a green 1997 Jeep Wrangler with oversize tires, a beautiful blond and a life many would envy. I left and moved to Brazil, and within two months of my arrival I accidentally started **Rocinha CrossFit** in one of the most notorious slums on the planet.

In the beginning I was teaching English for a non-government organization (NGO) named Two Brothers Foundation. I never lied about being a U.S. Marine, and when the word spread, I was nudged toward teaching exercise classes. We found old basketballs and volleyballs and made medicine balls and kettlebells. With an old, rusty iron bar and two used tire rims, we welded an Olympic bar, and so on.

I e-mailed CrossFit co-founder Greg Glassman to let him know there was a community here very interested in his product. He replied instantly and enthusiastically, and we were granted a not-for-profit affiliation. We struggled with no formal training and minimal equipment, but the affiliation gave us hope and we persevered.

The principal driving force for Rocinha CrossFit is Rogerio. Rogerio, born and raised in Rocinha, is the lead volunteer coordinator for Two Brothers Foundation, the NGO that I volunteer with in Rocinha. Rogerio speaks English, French and Spanish fluently. Aside from working full-time with the NGO, Rogerio boxes, teaches boxing and is the lead instructor for Rocinha CrossFit. Since Rocinha CrossFit's inception, two other instructors have joined the program. Kleber is a talented boxer and expert instructor, and Dani is a university student and boxer.



Rocinha CrossFit, a non-profit affiliate, is housed on a rooftop in the favela. Its athletes use do-it-yourself gear for their WODs, and programming requires a great deal of creativity.



CrossFit has found a home in the cramped favela, where homes are seemingly built one on top of the other.

Rogério found an empty rooftop to rent, a spartan area in need of much repair. You get to our rooftop via three flights of concrete stairs through the middle of an apartment building, passing open doors to families cooking and children playing. Our rooftop stands in the center of the most active area of Rocinha, providing a beautiful view from the center of the concave bowl that shapes the slum. During workouts, you can look to the ocean and to the community, and you can feel the ocean wind and see the kites flying above the impossible mosaic of homes built too close together with urgency and more regard for survival than elegance. Our area has faulty lighting, a toilet that doesn't function and a leaky roof, and after 20 minutes of class the dust from the old concrete floor makes breathing difficult.

The past four months have seen much improvement. Our team has repainted the walls, and we used a donation from the Vickers family in Ohio to fix the concrete floor. Classes continue, and the market for more membership is there, but the WODs always need to be modified due to lack of equipment.

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Fitness—and Hope

Life in a favela is vibrant and exciting, but it is also fatiguing even on the strongest of hearts. The Rocinha child holds daring dreams that speak and sometimes yell in the mind and heart, but those voices grow faint to a whisper and become inaudible not due to a single event but rather an infinite number of barely perceptible negative daily occurrences. Over years, these occurrences collectively form an opposing force that's wave-like—deep and mighty yet invisible.

These conditions that hold back the growth of the individual also force him to become stronger. Small investments in these individuals cause changes in the positive direction. We can seize this opportunity to help by using CrossFit as the channel.

My motivation to start this project was entirely selfish and not at all altruistic. Rocinha accepted me with an open heart and a strong embrace. Rocinha gave me the privilege of investing and creating something truly unique, and the joy that I receive from this project doesn't seem to have a limit. In this lifetime, I cannot possibly give back what Rocinha has given me, nor in a hundred more lifetimes, and I am ready for others to experience the power of what I have experienced. There is more work to be done.

Rocinha CrossFit is ready to grow, but the following issues need to be resolved: our equipment is minimal and in poor condition. Equipment purchase in Brazil is prohibitively expensive. We need to find organizations that can help with donations. If equipment donations can be found, we need economical shipping solutions.

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Chris Clark has found that just a little effort with a young Brazilian athlete brings an incredible reward.

Rocinha CrossFit's competitive advantage lies in our instructors' energy, our location in the community, our price point, and CrossFit's natural product differentiation vs. standard gyms. However, without a baseline set of equipment, our value proposition suffers and the accounts receivable figure will continue to rise. I believe we only have a few more months until our unpaid instructors will need to focus their time toward something that can pay their rent.

I am early in the process of forming a non-profit corporation in order to obtain federal 501(c)(3) tax-exemption status. We need to form a board of directors, ideally including someone with non-profit and fundraising experience, a CrossFit instructor and a lawyer familiar with non-profits. Certainly being a director with Rocinha CrossFit presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to engage in meaningful international social work, not to mention the satisfaction of involvement with a hardcore project in the city of Rio de Janeiro, site of the 2016 Olympic Games.

My first year in Rio de Janeiro, I tried to capture the essence of the city: what is good, what is bad, and why it is so. I failed. By conceptualizing Rio, the truth constantly evaded me. Rio is everything and nothing at the same time. It is death: the threat of violence producing a thin cloud of fear, the stark contrast of rich and poor, the socioeconomic conditions, the thin margin between life and death. Rio is also life: the sun and the bustle and heat and sweat that melt into the soft sex electricity of the night. Rio de Janeiro is the city of this decade, rich in culture and tremendously complex, yet only human. The world watches as the city exposes itself and at the same time exposes man's true nature to the world.

Rocinha CrossFit is raw and human, and the story represents everything that is good and everything that is bad. With some help and a few resources, the story can be glorious.



About the Author

Chris T. Clark was born and raised in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. He went to Miami University and studied physics under an NROTC scholarship. He was commissioned as a Marine officer and went to flight school in Pensacola, Fla., and he flew an F/A-18D Hornet as a Naval Flight Officer (Nav). He saw two Pacific deployments and one combat tour in Iraq during the 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom Campaign. After the first tour he moved to Nashville, Tenn., and spent three years as NROTC Unit Vanderbilt University's Marine officer instructor.

In 2008, he completed an MBA from Owen Graduate School of Management, Vanderbilt University. He was separated from active duty in August 2008 (from Nashville) and moved to Brazil in November of that year. He is currently working and living in Brazil's capital, Brasília, as a liaison officer for the U.S. Military Liaison Office, U.S. Embassy Brasília. He is on one-year active orders as a reservist.