

# Strength in Numbers

## Organized workouts with crewmembers help build & sustain motivation



Story & Photos By  
Fire Captains Jeff  
& Martha Ellis

Last month's column addressed some simple ways to maintain your motivation to exercise; now let's turn our attention to another useful tactic in this pursuit: drawing on the concerted efforts of your friends, crew, fire department or community. After all, there really is strength in numbers. Organizing workouts with your crew or other department members may not make your workout *easier*, but it will definitely improve your chances of getting to the gym.

### TEAM WORKOUT 411

The team philosophy is most powerful and effective when it starts at the top. Therefore, we encourage department heads to get serious about fitness. Why is this so important? Helping improve the department's overall fitness level—by investing in exercise equipment or memberships to a local gym and allowing time to train—can have a profound impact on proficiency. And such an investment shows firefighters that their chief and department really do care

about their health and well-being.

Maintaining your workforce's fitness levels should be as much a part of running a department as sending your rigs in for repair and ensuring your breathing apparatus function properly. It's as much a part of the job as performing daily fire training or completing the monthly quota of business inspections. Yet some chiefs still fail to properly support the implementation of department-wide fitness programs.

At a bare minimum, every station should designate a time for fitness. Granted, when the alarm goes off, all bets are off. But short of running calls all day—which we know some of you do—there's always time for a quick workout.

Everyone has their personal preferences about when and where to work out, but we've found that first thing in the morning is generally the best bet. Why? As the day wears on, we become increasingly tired, and by late afternoon, we usually just want to relax—not hit the gym. Of course, that's not to say

Follow the leader, or group-led exercises, are great ways to get your crew involved. You can perform these exercises around the station, on the drill ground or at a local park. This is a great opportunity to perform SCBA-involved drills and ensure everyone is comfortable with heavy exertion while breathing air. If refilling your bottles is an issue, perform the exercises without the face piece.



you should omit your workout altogether if you can't find time first thing in the morning. If morning isn't an option, try to exercise after your afternoon inspections or fire training. And if that doesn't work, hit the gym after dinner. *The bottom line:* Do what you must to get the job done and maintain your fitness level.

Look around your community for resources that can help you. Many towns and cities have community centers, recreation centers, parks, running tracks at schools, private gyms or YMCAs where you can exercise. If these facilities are in your district, why not take advantage of them? Getting your crew into these environments makes it difficult for even the most exercise-resistant person to sit still.

Additionally, it's a great reflection on the department for the public to see their local firefighters dedicated to maintaining their fitness levels to better serve the community. Just remember, when you're in any such environment, you're representing your department, so professionalism is paramount.

Regardless of where or when you work out, making it a crew activity creates a more entertaining, creative and consistent training environment where you can draw on each other's experience, research, strengths and motivation.

## ORGANIZED WORKOUT IDEAS

Some crews are content to wander into the weight room around the same time and crank up the tunes

as each crewmember does their own thing. That's great, especially if the crewmembers have varying goals, objectives and needs. However, creating organized workouts for your crew has a more binding impact. With this in mind, let's discuss some ideas for organized workouts.

*Intervals:* Intervals with 4–10 crewmembers work well because as one or two crewmembers work, the others rest. You can apply the principles of interval training to any type of exercise, from sprints at the track to fireground evolutions. The possibilities are endless. Some examples: running stairs, dragging a dummy, throwing a ladder or pulling hose. It's best to start with single-skill intervals and develop them into evolution-based intervals that link several skills at a time. Intervals are also great because they help sharpen basic fireground skills.

*Follow the Leader:* Follow the leader may sound like a game you outgrew years ago, but it's actually a great way to exercise while having some fun. Some crews even do it while on air. So, how do you "play" follow the leader? Preferably while wearing your PPE, one crewmember leads the rest through a series of exercises, obstacles and skill stations. Incorporate stair climbing, fireground skills and calisthenics to round out the workout. Try to keep moving for at least 20 minutes or until the last member is out of air. If someone runs out of air in less than 20 minutes, have them pull their mask and continue. The beauty of the workout is in its adaptability and unpredictability. You can do it just



Ladders can be incorporated into circuit training or the follow-the-leader exercise. Using ground ladders allows several people to climb at the same time, but never pass up an opportunity to put up the aerial and climb it, too.

about anywhere. Again, this is a great way to maintain and sharpen your fireground skills, especially if you work in a district that doesn't see a lot of "on-air" opportunities.

*Circuit Training:* Circuit training involves setting up several different weight-lifting, calisthenic or aerobic workstations and rotating through each of them with very little, if any, rest in between. Circuit training lends itself perfectly to a group training effort. Design your circuits so there are as many (or more) stations as there are crewmembers.

The stations can be simple, like calisthenics, or more complex and equipment-intensive, like weights. You can also include aerobic equipment or plyometrics to keep it interesting. Then set a time goal on each piece of equipment and have crewmembers rotate at the end of each period. The workout should last at least 20 minutes.

You don't need a lot of fancy equipment to design any of these workouts. You can use items lying around your storage room to create useful, fun workstations for your crew. For example, you could strap a 25-foot-long 2 ½" hose to an old truck tire and take turns dragging it; this is an inexpensive way to strengthen the appropriate leg muscles for those difficult hoselays.

Another example: You could permanently mount an old extension ladder to the firehouse or training tower to allow for safe repetitions of a halyard pull. For a few dollars, you could mount a simple pulley system with weights on one end and an old pike pole on the other to create a workstation



Circuit training can be performed in the station or out on the drill ground.



Left: Make a little competition out of your efforts. This hanging contest can help with your grip strength, which may come in handy if you find yourself in a precarious position. Each person hangs from the rung of the ladder or a chin up bar for as long as possible. The person with the longest time doesn't do dishes that night!

### THE MORE THE MERRIER

Organizing workouts with your friends, family or crewmembers is a great way to stay motivated. After all, never underestimate the power of peer pressure. If you have a scheduled appointment to meet up with a friend to hit the gym, you're far less likely to flake. Also, if you design organized workouts with your crew, you can use the regular and predictable nature of work to lend structure to your program. Working out will become as much a part of your workday as your morning apparatus and medical gear checks. So sit down with your crew and develop a plan. Then get up and get moving! ☺

specific to the movement pattern of pulling ceilings. Be creative and don't be afraid to use what you have around your department to make viable workout equipment.

**Crossfit:** We mentioned the Crossfit workout program ([www.crossfit.com](http://www.crossfit.com)) last month and highly recommend it for individual or crew workouts. It's a great resource for workout ideas. If you look at a Crossfit workout and feel like it's way out of your league, try to find creative ways to make it work. For example, decrease the prescribed weight load, perform fewer reps or perform the aerobic exercises at a lesser intensity than suggested. As we stated before, there are no Crossfit police who will cite you for not completing the workout as prescribed. Use the site to help spur your creativity when creating workouts for you or your team.

Captain Martha Ellis has been a firefighter with the Salt Lake City Fire Department (SLCFD) for more than 12 years, serving as a firefighter, engineer, media technician and ARFF training officer. She has won the Scott Firefighter Combat Challenge Women's Division five times, and held the world record for 8 consecutive years. She is currently the fire marshal for Salt Lake International Airport, and she works as a certified fitness coordinator for the SLCFD.

Captain Jeff Ellis of the Murray (Utah) Fire Department (MFD) has served as a firefighter, engineer, hazmat technician and shift training captain. He has been a certified fitness coordinator for the department since 1996. As a competitor in the Scott Firefighter Combat Challenge, he has won two overall world championships and three Over 40 world championships and helped MFD take the team trophy. He has been active in teaching all aspects of firefighting, including swiftwater rescue and fitness and nutrition in the fire service.