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## Steve's Club

A Nonprofit CrossFit Affiliate for Urban Youth

Steve Liberati

Hello, I'm Steve. I started Steve's Club in May of 2007 in a large apartment complex located on the north side of Camden, New Jersey. Traditionally ranked as one of "America's Most Dangerous Cities," Camden can be a very rough place for a kid to grow up. It's a place that boasts a murder rate more than seven times the national average, despite occupying a total land area of only ten square miles. Daily life can prove to be an uphill battle. For a young kid trying to imagine a world outside of his or her own, the prospects can seem dark and bleak when violence and drugs are the orders of the day. The cycle continues as kids are recruited at a disturbingly young age to begin a career selling drugs on the corner and rising through the ranks of the local gang. Any sliver of hope for a better

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My first trainee was Arvon, a high school senior and star running back who was looking for a “serious” strength and conditioning program to prepare him for college athletics. As luck would have it, Arvon heard about me through his uncle Craig, a maintenance man at the apartment complex whom I had told about wanting to donate my time to train young budding athletes in the area. After I had a few one-on-one sessions with Arvon, he was bit by the CrossFit bug, and it was only a matter of days before he invited several of his friends to partake in our unusual style of training. We kept the intensity (and the music) sky high, and the kids just ate it up, spreading the word and bringing in anyone they could find who was willing to share in the pain and glory. It was while watching these kids pin all their hopes on a sport and define themselves almost entirely by their accomplishments that I decided to invest more time and resources in the club, expanding the size and reach of the program.

In order to get the club going, I purchased around \$2,500 in equipment—enough to accommodate 25 students at a given time—along with a used fifteen-passenger van to transport the kids back and forth. My equipment purchases included barbells, dumbbells, steel plates and bumpers, stall mats for the floor, materials to construct homemade equipment, a custom-made pull-up bar (that can be taken down for storage purposes), a weight bench, plyo boxes, jump ropes, homemade parallel bars, squat stands, and more.

While the use of sports and recreational activities as vehicles for lifting up urban youth and showing them the opportunities they might not otherwise see is not a new concept, the need for such an undertaking became clear to me while I worked as an exterminator in the “hard neighborhoods” of Camden over the preceding two years. As a strong advocate for good nutrition and physical health, I reached out to some of the neighborhood youth and simply invited some of them to work out with me in the local apartment complex recreational center. The interest and eagerness of the growing number of participants quickly led me to realize just what a great opportunity the club had to impact the lives of kids searching for some structure and direction.

future or “getting out” quickly gets washed away by the tempting allure of fast money, power, and the sense of belonging offered on the streets.

I can still vividly remember the first day that I lugged weights, bars, and equipment from my truck into the small community center room. As local commerce was bustling on that blazing hot summer day, the young kids on the corner (known as “hoppers”) couldn’t help but wonder what the heck I was doing. It wasn’t long before two of the older kids walked over and showered me with questions. After I introduced myself and explained who I was and that I was starting a fitness program, the two kids just gave me a grave stare before turning away to resume their business. I pressed on.

If it wasn’t for my working relationship with the property manager (who is a long-time client of my father’s business), I’m not sure if things would have transpired the way they did. She loved the idea from the start and kindly allowed us to use their small community center room for classes and training. In return, she asked that we keep the space clean and put the equipment away locked up in the storage room during non-training hours.



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Realizing that organized sport might be “the way out” for some but certainly not all of these youths in jeopardy, I expanded the club’s purpose to make it a program designed to leverage interest in athletics into a multi-dimensional set of activities. Getting fitter or getting better at a sport, though great for the character, does not always translate directly into making someone a better student or better citizen. In addition, someone who already is a good student can gain a lot much-needed self-respect through developing their physical abilities as well. The mantra is simple: The physically endowed share their gifts with the academically endowed who, in turn share their gifts, and so on, including contributions from those with cultural, civic, or community talents, as well as other interests and skills.

Steve’s Club builds on the kids’ inherent interest in athletics to engage them in a fitness program promoting excellence both on the field and off. While physical fitness is the heart and soul of Steve’s Club, a sense of community, belonging, and responsibility is its backbone. Unfortunately, many of the youths that Steve’s Club serves face decisions every day that can lead them down a road of trouble and, more often than not, into youth detention centers or prisons. Commuters coming from the rich suburbs of South Jersey can peer down on the city of Camden, sitting adjacent to a riverfront prison, a pressing reminder of the fate of too many of its young men and women.

Trainees are taught that they can succeed with hard work and determination. Steve’s Club fosters this “I can do it” attitude in all three spheres: mind, body, and soul. Our goal is to raise a trainee’s self-confidence and self-discipline. This positive attitude translates into providing a solid foundation for upholding excellence in those three spheres in all phases of our lives. Our

commitment to teaching positive values, healthy habits, and high expectation for success are part of what drives the club and gives it a high success rate. In a nutshell, many of our participants gradually gain a new sense of purpose, accountability, civic responsibility, and, most importantly, hope for themselves and the rest of their community.

With childhood obesity quickly becoming an epidemic, encouraging children to be active and enjoy physical activity is imperative in setting the stage for a healthy future. It is our position at Steve’s Club that your physical strength and health is not dictated by the size of your house, how much money you have, the car you drive, the clothes you wear, or the town you are from. It has very little to do with the genes you inherited at birth. Instead, your physical capacity and athletic success, like everything else in life, has everything to do with effort, hard work, and commitment (which serve as the club’s membership fee). Dedicating yourself to a “world-class fitness program” improves the potential to achieve excellence not only in sport but in life.

CrossFit makes it all happen. Simply put, without CrossFit there would be no Steve’s Club today. CrossFit is the perfect workout prescription for people of all ages—and it has been especially effective for our young kids. It’s challenging, certainly, but it’s also effective and *fun*. Rather than spend time training to get one body part to look “big,” CrossFit’s reliance on varied, functional, compound movements to get the body and mind fit gives a broader appeal and effect. The concept is simple: Give kids training that they enjoy doing, and before you know it you have physically fit and capable kids, who work together and support their fellow athletes even as they compete against them. It is a wonderful phenomenon! CrossFit, and not playing an exercise

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game on PlayStation or removing soda machines from a cafeteria, makes real progress in the current war on juvenile obesity and aimlessness.

At present our Club still has limited access to the recreational center where we started. However, our time is quickly running out, and we have just until the fall to find a new home when the other after-school program at the community center starts back up. We take advantage of substantial public park training facilities and parks as well, weather permitting, but we are looking for alternate space to house both the physical fitness program and also areas for discussion groups, tutoring, and related activities. Our hours of operation are flexible but generally match up with after-school hours for the kids. I managed (don't ask how!) to convince my father to arrange my work schedule at his termite extermination business to accommodate our club's hours, as best as possible. At present, we meet four times per week, Monday through Thursday between 3:30 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. Despite our small space, we can have anywhere from 8 to 20 kids on any given day. If the group is larger than 10, Derek (who is learning to be a trainer) and I split the kids up into smaller groups so we can manage equipment and maintain a high level of individual instruction and attention.

Our "gym" has some weights and rudimentary equipment, but it is not the monetary value or fanciness of the gear that matters—as many CrossFitters can attest. What does matter is the camaraderie and the friendly challenges that form between club members and eventually grow into producing individuals who can lead healthier, happier, more productive lives. And that is what it is really about—providing a contagious community where the youth can develop themselves and each other physically, interpersonally, and civically.

Although our results are easily seen in the videos, comments, and pictures posted on our website (as well as in the workout logs that our athletes keep on our sponsor's website), Steve's Club is a story in the making. There are new success stories unfolding all the time at Steve's Club—whether it's Derek's personal triumph of cutting ties with his former gang to lead a healthy lifestyle at Steve's Club, or Chris's loss of over 40 pounds of excess body weight, or Keith's increasing his CrossFit Total by more than 250 pounds in less than four months, or Mere's pulling up his grades from Ds and Fs to Bs and Cs, or Damu's learning how to cooperate with his peers, or Justin's mastery of some of the more complex CrossFit skills (pistols, kipping pull-ups, cleans, etc.) and his ability to start teaching them to the younger kids in the club.

To date, all the training has been done completely on a volunteer basis. This will continue until sufficient revenues are available to provide compensation to me and any other trainers. This should coincide with an expansion of membership to a point where my time commitment will be substantial. As the program base continues to expand, additional trainers will be brought on board.



The primary sources of funds for the club come from me, as well as several other generous individuals and caring affiliates from the CrossFit community (many of whom donate through our website). Future donations and contributions will be used to cover the expenses of a new facility to help carry out our mission and spread our impact to hundreds of other children in the community that are not being reached due to a lack of resources regarding adequate space.

As Daniel Quinn (author of the novel *Ishmael*) is fond of saying, "If the world is saved it won't be saved by old minds with new programs. If it is saved, it will be saved by new minds with no programs at all." Each of us must become an agent of change within the range of our own influence, and it doesn't matter how great that range is. The simple fact is that we each have exponential potential. We can use that potential or not. We can use it with one kid or twenty. In one city or with everyone we meet. So that is what I'm doing. Perhaps one day, Steve's Club will serve as a model for other affiliates and individuals to expand CrossFit's influence on more inner-city youths nationwide.



**Steve Liberati** is the founder of [Steve's Club](#), a proud [CrossFit](#) and [CrossFit Kids](#) affiliate. He is a Level-I certified CrossFit trainer, as well as one of the founding partners of [EvoFit South Jersey](#), a CrossFit affiliate located in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. Steve is a passionate trainer who loves helping people of all backgrounds and ages develop their bodies into the efficient,

functional machines they were designed to be.

If you would like to make a monthly donation or sponsor an athlete, please visit the website or send e-mail to Steve at [slibs66@comcast.net](mailto:slibs66@comcast.net).