

MADISON

Vista athletes 'just do it'

Finding fitness and confidence at Hammonasset Crossfit 11/16/18

By Lisa Reisman

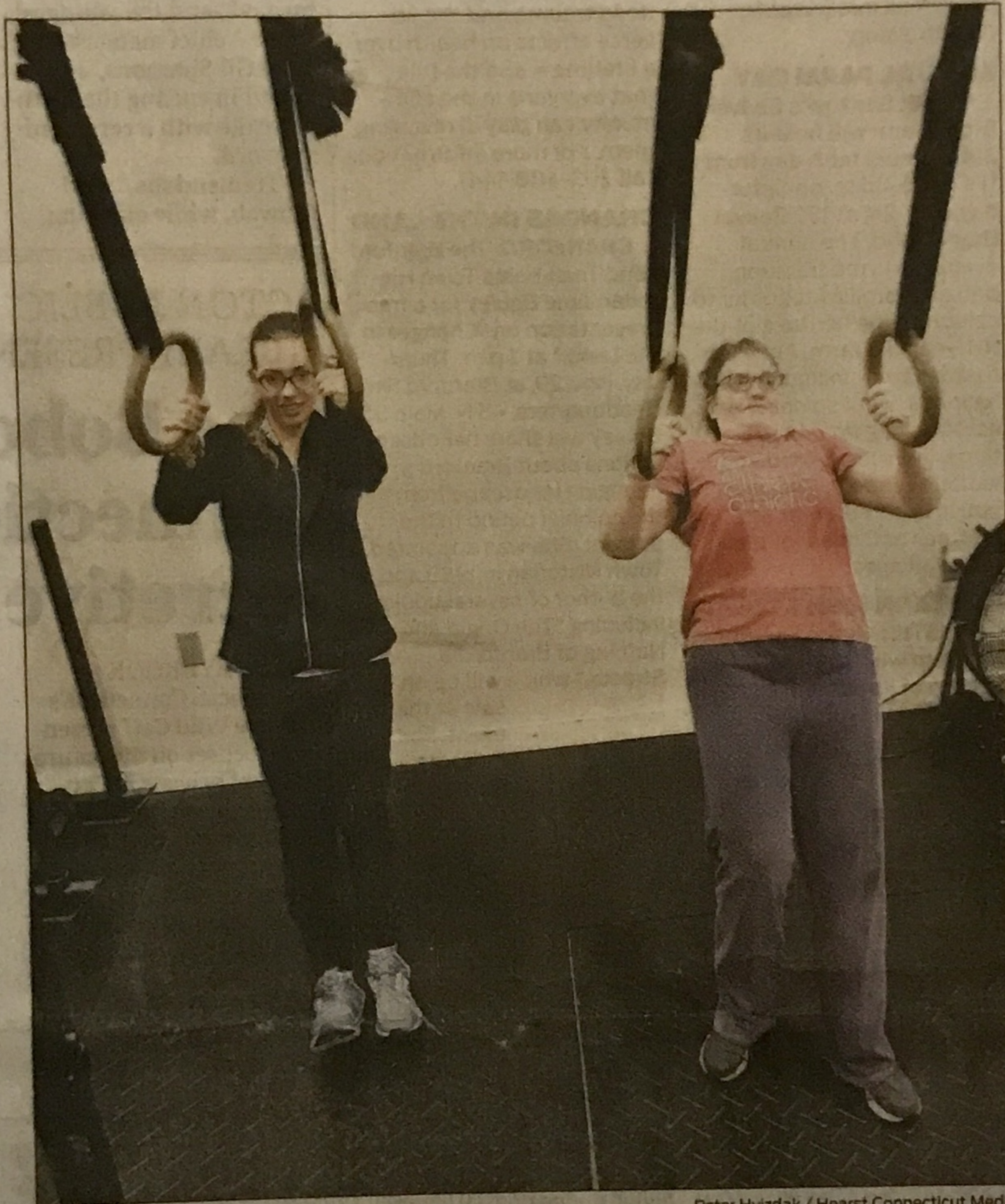
MADISON — Last Monday night, as Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" blared through the brightly-lit studio occupied by Hammonasset Crossfit in Madison, a group of 12 athletes circled the perimeter, each holding aloft a foam pad known as an ab mat, as if they were waiters balancing heavy platters.

One had the binder-sized square pad high above his head, arm locked. Another held it up with both arms, taking tiny steps. A third, with the ab mat raised halfway, cut an alternate route through the space, grooving to the music.

"Don't spill that drink," trainer Rob Lavigne called out.

"We won't," said a fourth, as she brought up the rear. "We won't."

The 12 athletes are members of Vista Life Innovations, the Madison-based nationally-recognized post-secondary program whose mission is to "provide services and resources to



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Vista Life Innovations students Julia, of Old Saybrook, left, and Linay, of Westbrook, workout on the rings at Hammonasset CrossFit of Madison with Vista Life Innovations students on Nov. 12.

assist individuals with disabilities achieve personal success," as its website reads.

For the last three years, they, and other members, have been waiter-walking, air-squatting and bear-crawling, among other exercises, each Monday night at the Bradley Road studio.

The philosophy, said HCF owner and gym dietitian Jessica Dean, is no different from what they seek to impart to all their clients. "We're practicing functional movements that will translate into your everyday life," she said. "That's the basis. You build from there."

The so-called waiter's walk, for example, helps with coordination and balance. An air squat strengthens muscles deployed when getting up from a chair, or up off the floor. Bear crawls make it easier to crouch down for something.

The constant variation of workouts designed by Dean and Lavigne might seem overwhelming. Or intimidating. Not so.

From the time someone from Vista asked Dean if HCF had interest in a class for its members three years ago, "it's been the most popular class among Vista athletes," she said.

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Just ask another member, who's also been coming since the beginning.

"I love it because it makes me feel good and I feel so relaxed after it," she said, taking a break as the rest of the group lay on their backs, engaged in flutter kicks as part of an AMRAP (as many rounds as possible) workout.

"You should feel it in your belly," Lavigne said. "You gotta work on your core. It's going to be bikini season before you know it."

"Yeah!" someone shouted, fluttering his legs harder.

That expression of genuine enthusiasm is not uncommon among those in the Monday-night

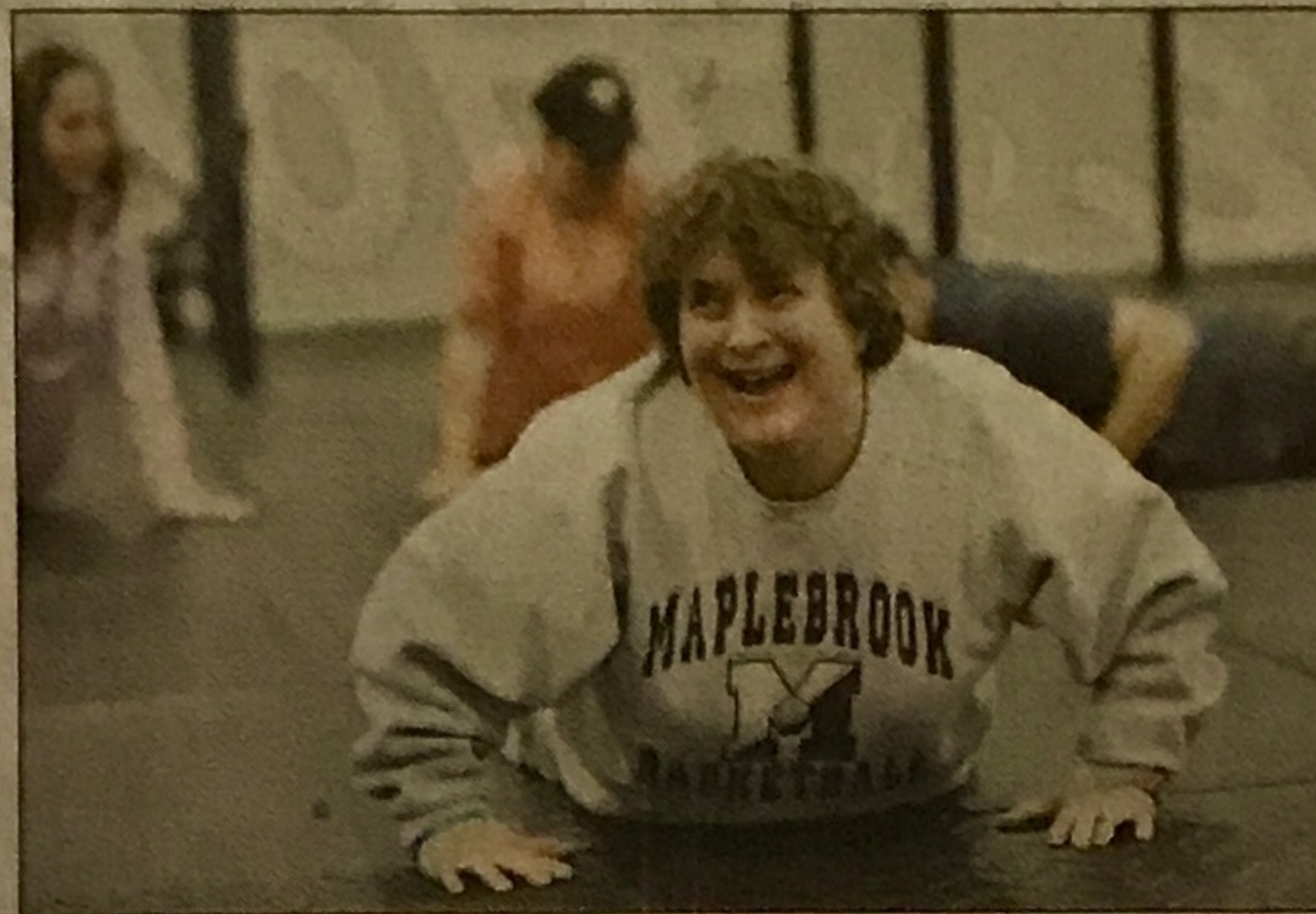
workout. "They're game to try everything," said Lavigne. "They're not looking for the easy way out, and they never complain, ever. If it's burpees, it's 'OK, how many?'"

That said, "obviously some of these athletes work with limitations," he added. "Obviously the intensity is different. We might not have them jumping on boxes or doing barbell work."

In the end, they're really no different from other clients, according to Dean. "They want to be pushed and challenged to do something that might seem beyond them," she said.

"They just need someone to tell them they can."

Witness a member engaged in lunges in the AMRAP workout. The first few rounds, eyes



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Vista Life Innovations student Andrea, of Westbrook, left, exercises at Hammonasset CrossFit in Madison on Nov. 12.

fixed in concentration, he struggled to maintain his balance. Perspiration beaded on his forehead. "You're getting there, buddy," Lavigne called out as

he passed him. Gradually his movements grew more fluid. "Awesome, bud," Lavigne said as he passed again. A small smile spread across the mem-

ber's face.

"That's what's most rewarding for us," said Dean. "Rob and I both got into Crossfit for the physical gain, but there's also an inner strength you develop, a confidence. I opened HCF in 2015 to share that."

It's worked, according to Jessica Lilge, coordinator of Vista's quality of life program. "There's a reason so many of these members continue to opt into doing Crossfit," she said. "You can see it. You can see how good they feel about themselves. It's just a confidence radiating off them."

Another possible reason, which became evident during the stretching that ended the workout: it's fun. "Say hi to your knees," Lavigne called out. "Hi!" a member

shouted, as he bent his body into the forward fold position.

"It's amazing to see someone who came in shy and unsure of himself now clowning around and enjoying himself and doing everything," Dean said.

"The pride we see in them, the sense of accomplishment, is priceless." **►** Hammonasset Crossfit is located on 111 Bradley Road, Madison. For more information, email info@HammonassetCrossFit.com or visit www.hammonassetcrossfit.com. For more information on Vista Life Innovations, visit www.vistalifeinnovation-s.org.

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