
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

A “Lucky” Olympian

After an accident left her without the use of her legs, Chile’s Francisca Mardones discovered wheelchair tennis. And the rest of the world discovered her. Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

August 2012



When Francisca Mardones was 5, she dreamed of being an Olympian.

Her wish would be granted. But not in the vein of her childhood imagination.

Fate, it seems, had slightly different plans.

By the time the Chilean graduated from high school, she had played multiple sports: basketball, track and field, volleyball. In other words, she didn’t become a specialist.

“I realized I never focused on one sport,” Mardones said. “I was not good enough to go to the Olympics.”

So she went off to Santiago to study hotel administration at INACAP, a nonprofit private corporation that is Chile’s largest educational institution. After college, in 1999, she got a job as an administrator for a group of luxury villas in the Caribbean. The year went down in the history books as a record-setting one in the Atlantic hurricane season, with five storms reaching Category 4 strength. Hurricane Lenny was one of them. In November, the storm made its way toward the island of Culebra, where Mardones was working. Culebra, owned by Puerto Rico, is part of the Spanish Virgin Islands.

As the boss, Mardones was tasked with going door-to-door, warning tourists of the impending threat and advising them to return to their countries as soon as possible.

But the rain had started and the 155-mile-per-hour winds were approaching. As Mardones went to leave one villa to go to the next, she slipped. She fell about 14 feet into a ravine.

"As soon as I fell, I knew the situation was serious," she wrote in an email in Spanish. "But however I had to do it, I needed to get out of there because I could lose my life."

Mardones couldn't move her legs. So with her arms, she dragged herself nearly 330 feet to a bunker. Her body got cold. The pain became excruciating.

"I could barely breathe," she recalled.

For two days, Mardones remained alone in the bunker.

"I thought I was going to die and that the world was going to end," she said. "I'd never heard those sounds of a hurricane. It was like the sky was falling in pieces."

"As soon as I fell, I knew the situation was serious."

—Francisca Mardones

After the storm passed, the villas' employees found her.

Mardones returned to Chile only to spend the next year in the hospital for countless surgeries.

"Doctors gave me lots of medicine to try to control the pain, but it didn't work," she remembered.

Mardones had lost the use of her legs. She spent the next four years in rehab. While there, she was approached with a curious question: "Do you want to play tennis?"

"I thought it was a joke," she said.

Her response: "How can I play tennis? I can't walk. I can't run."

The answer: "In a wheelchair."

"So I go to the court and start to practice," Mardones said. "Then I said, 'OK, that's the option I have. I'm going to take it.'"

That was six years ago.

Today, the 34-year-old has qualified for the Paralympic Games in London in wheelchair tennis. She is ranked No. 26 in the world.

"My dream came true," Mardones said.

"I thought I was going to die and that the world was going to end."

—Francisca Mardones

And Then There Was CrossFit

Through mutual friends, Mardones met Ricardo Tagle, head coach at CrossFit XF in Vitacura, Chile.

Six months later, in February 2011, she was at the box.

"I love CrossFit. For me, it's like being in a war," Mardones said. "It taught me to not quit and ... (that) everything can change in the last minute. You can control your mind and you can control your body."

Before CrossFit, her training comprised an oft-repeated routine that involved machines and focused on one muscle group per workout.



Ricardo Tagle

CrossFit has given Mardones more power on the tennis court and improved her reaction time.

"Every day was the same," Mardones explained. "Every time I went to the gym, I (got) injured. I wanted to find something different. I tried CrossFit and I never injured myself again."

**"I love CrossFit. For me,
it's like being in a war."**

—Francisca Mardones

The difference is evident on the court.

"My arms are much more powerful," she said. "My upper body, too. I have much more control. I have better reaction (time) and power. I feel really good now."

Mardones trains five days a week at CrossFit XF; six days a week, she practices her sport, which is identical to able-bodied tennis except the ball may bounce twice.

"What definitely helps Francisca the most is that we're able to realize a training method that's safe, effective and efficient," Tagle wrote in Spanish in an email. "We follow the 80/20



Cristóbal Sánchez

CrossFit gave Mardones the physical and mental strength she needed to realize her Olympic dreams.

rule: 80 percent of the results we obtain with 20 percent of the resources. And in that, CrossFit offers many tools. That balance that's found in mixing motor components in high-intensity intervals makes it so Francisca doesn't waste her time and offers her satisfactory results."

Tagle divides Mardones' programming into three phases:

1. Strength training
2. Met-con
3. Core strengthening

For strength, Mardones does such exercises as the bench press and shoulder press. Tagle's goal is to ensure Mardones—unlike other professional tennis players—maintains muscular balance in both arms.

**"It gave her the mental
fortitude that a
champion needs."**

—Ricardo Tagle

During met-cons, Mardones sometimes leaves her wheelchair for pull-ups on the rings or bar, as well as dips and push-ups; other times, she does interval sprints.

The core strengthening is important to keep Mardones' back strong and to improve performance in her sport, Tagle said.

"Most of the time, I do the same thing as everyone else," Mardones said of the workouts at CrossFit XF.

"Ricardo always asks me for more than the others. I love that," she said. "I like the way he trains me. It has been one of the most important things to me because I really feel ... not disabled, only different."

An Olympian At Last

On June 16, Mardones updated her Facebook status in Spanish:

"Yesterday I finished playing my tournaments. It went very well. I'm very happy with the level of tennis I've reached. Now all that's left is to wait until Monday, the day on which the official list of players going to London is published. Only three days left before I know if my lifelong dream will become a reality!"

And so it did.

"God wants my dream to come true, but in a different way. Now I understand it."

—Francisca Mardones

Mardones left Aug. 20 for London. Six gold medals are up for grabs in as many events Sept. 1 to 8 at Eton Manor.

When asked how she felt about her Olympic qualification, Mardones had trouble putting emotions into words.

"Wow, I didn't believe it," she said. "I'm a really lucky person."

CrossFit, Tagle said, brought out the best in Mardones.

"It gave her the mental fortitude that a champion needs," he said. "It showed her to stay focused in the face of important mental and physical challenges and, of course, it showed her how to be unyielding."

Tagle continued: "Francisca is an inspiration for all CrossFit XF members. Watching her train is amazing."

In England, Mardones said she simply wants to absorb the moment.

"I'm lucky because I don't have the pressure to win a medal," she said. "I'm going to enjoy it, however I play. It's making me feel relaxed."

A year ago, Mardones almost beat the world's No. 2 player. She lost in the third set. The culprit, she said, was the pressure.

"Now it's totally different," Mardones said. "Now I know everything can happen. I'm really excited about that."

She added: "To win a medal would be the most incredible finale—like a movie."

When she returns from London, Mardones already has plans to compete in three tournaments in the States—and stop in at CrossFit affiliates along the way to prepare.

"If I show up at your CrossFit one day, please help me train," said the jet setter.

Looking back on her childhood dream, Mardones says she now sees the grand plan.

"Maybe it was my destiny. The accident that I had—bad things happened to me. But now I can understand what happened to me, and I feel good because that's my destiny and God wants my dream to come true, but in a different way," she said. "Now I understand it. I'm so happy with that."

Links

FranciscaMardones.cl

Twitter: [@Fran_Mardones](https://twitter.com/Fran_Mardones)

[ITF Tennis profile](#)



Courtesy of Andrea Maria Cecil

About the Author

*Andréa Maria Cecil is the North East Regional Media Director for the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games. She spent nearly 13 years as a professional journalist, most recently as managing editor of the **Central Penn Business Journal** in Harrisburg, Pa. Cecil has been a freelance writer and editor for the **CrossFit Journal** since 2010. The 34-year-old is a native of New Orleans who lives in York County, Pa. There, she's been doing CrossFit since 2008 at **CrossFit York**, where she coaches Olympic weightlifting as a USA Weightlifting Level 1 Sports Performance Coach. Additionally, Cecil dedicates three days a week to training the Olympic lifts herself at **McKenna's Gym**.*