

# the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

## Jiu-Jitsu Journey

How Valerie Worthington Found CrossFit and Won the Gold Medal

Becca Borawski



The U.S. team showing off their sweep of the golds at the 2007 World Grappling Championships in Turkey. Valerie is second from right in the front row. - Photo courtesy of USA Wrestling

Just a couple of months ago, in September 2007, Valerie Worthington stood on top of a podium in Turkey, accepting the gold medal for the Grappling World Championships. She was there representing the United States and joining her teammates in their sweep of the gold medals in all nine weight classes.

A little over one year earlier, in June of 2006, Valerie had stood in her empty condo in Chicago, finalizing its sale and officially making herself homeless. It was the beginning of what was intended to be a three-month trip around the country to train in Brazilian jiu-jitsu. With the money from her condo, she intended to buy a car, pack up her remaining belongings, and hit the road.

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## Jiu-Jitsu Journey (continued...)

Like many young professionals, Valerie reached a point in her life where she realized she had the car, the home, the job, and everything she was “supposed” to have, but it no longer felt satisfying. A graduate of Dartmouth and Michigan State University, Valerie was putting her doctorate in educational psychology to use working with the state of Illinois and an education corporation. Outside of work she had run marathons, trained in Muay Thai, and finally settled into training Brazilian jiu-jitsu with Carlson Gracie and Carlson Gracie, Jr., eventually earning her purple belt.

Despite all that, she felt a growing discontent and that perhaps the ambitions she had been fulfilling were not really her own. She took a close look at her life and desires and made the decision to start over, without knowing exactly where it was she was headed.

So, on July 1, 2006, Valerie left Chicago in her newly purchased car and began her journey. Her original intention was to travel around the country for three months visiting various jiu-jitsu and grappling schools. For her, jiu-jitsu was not only physically challenging, it presented something deeper. “There’s just something about pushing yourself physically that I think brings out a lot of mental, psychological, and emotional issues and fortitude,” she says.

A couple months into her journey, Valerie arrived in Los Angeles. Her intention was to train for two weeks and move on. The first school she trained at was the New Breed Academy, with instructors John Ouano and Johnny Ramirez. When Ramirez asked Valerie where she was staying and she had no answer, he offered up the academy as a place to stay.

For the next three months, the academy was Valerie’s home, and also the link that brought her to CrossFit. Fellow grappler Sean Robinson also trains in jiu-jitsu at New Breed and in CrossFit at Petranek Fitness/ CrossFit Los Angeles. Intrigued, Valerie came to a CrossFit class with him one morning. “I came in and I thought, maybe I know some things, and then I thought, wow, I really don’t even know how much I don’t know,” she says of her first experience. “CrossFit is a lot like grappling and jiu-jitsu, and what I mean by that is, first of all, there’s always something to work on, always something more to challenge you, and, second, it’s always extremely humbling.”

Like jiu-jitsu, CrossFit presented an arena in which to challenge herself, physically and psychologically.

Now, Valerie has been training at Petranek Fitness regularly since April 2007 and used it to prepare her for her grappling competitions. Having tried competing years earlier, Valerie at first shied away from another go at it. “I didn’t have the realization until more recently that skill in jiu-jitsu and skill in competing are two different things.” Her initial lack of success in competition as a blue belt had turned her off because she equated it with shortcomings in her jiu-jitsu and was not quite ready to face that.

Being in the highly competitive jiu-jitsu environment of Southern California, however, drew Valerie to try competition again. As a more mature athlete, and now a purple belt, she actively wanted to improve her jiu-jitsu and knew that competition was a way to do so. In competition there are unknown elements of the competitors, mental stressors, and great physical demands—the same things her CrossFit training was helping her to develop.

Competition was also scary. That’s where Valerie’s personal philosophy kicked in once again. “My philosophy these days, or the way I live my life these days, is that if someone suggests something and my immediate reaction is, oh, I could never do that, then I have to do it.” She explains this philosophy was the root of her journey and of her exploration of jiu-jitsu, “That’s why I ran a marathon, why I started to compete, why I started jiu-jitsu to begin with. The more I said to myself, I can’t



Valerie on top against Milda Shibonis at the World Team Trials.  
- Photo courtesy of AliciaPhotos.com

## Jiu-Jitsu Journey (continued...)

do this, I can't leave, I can't up and move and sell, the more I said, well there's clearly something here that I have to explore."

This second time around, Valerie found great success in competition. She competed and won at local and national levels and earned herself a spot on the U.S. team headed for the World Grappling Championships in Turkey.

CrossFit was an essential part of Valerie's preparation for her journey to Turkey. "When I started to compete half way seriously I was really concerned about conditioning, about my ability to last throughout however many matches I would need, and to have explosiveness when I needed it. It's something that I felt the lack of when I first started competing, because I thought, like a lot of grapplers do that I already train all the time." Many grapplers will argue that if they want to have the conditioning to do jiu-jitsu, they should just do jiu-jitsu all the time. "But you're not training all the time the way you compete," says Valerie. "Training and competing are two different skill sets and require two different types of energy and strength and focus." It's the difference between a skill-based workout and a metabolic conditioning workout in CrossFit—you need the skills to be able to do the metabolic workout effectively and efficiently, but you can't be prepared for the metabolic workout if you never train under those conditions.

"A really huge part of the skill set of being a competitor is feeling prepared," states Valerie. Since doing CrossFit, her feeling of preparation and confidence has been higher than ever before. "When I went to Turkey, when I went

to the Mundials, when I've done different competitions since I started CrossFit, I've never worried that I'll gas before my opponent." Valerie speaks often of the tremendous confidence that knowledge has given her and the competitive edge it brings to a match.

Her teammates speak of her noticeably increased strength. When Valerie began CrossFit, she could not do a single unassisted pull-up; now she can do eleven at once, and has done up to sixty-five within a single workout. In regard to the application of pull-ups to jiu-jitsu, Valerie says, "Those may not seem directly applicable to BJJ, but, for instance, they give me more power in my arm drags, which is an important BJJ movement. Ideally you put your whole body into arm drags, but the arm strength is important too."

Since Valerie began CrossFitting, her squat—and her hip strength and comfort in a fully flexed hip position—have also vastly improved. She began in what she describes as "remedial squat class." Now, she knows from experience what improving her squat can do for her. "In no-gi class a month or so ago, the instructor had us do as many double-leg takedowns as possible in a minute. Double-legs rely on that core strength that comes from the squat. I did the whole minute without stopping (pausing only as long as it took my partner to stand back up), and felt fine afterward. [My partner] and the other students in the class, on the other hand, were gassing pretty hard. And before Petranek Fitness, I would really have felt a drill like that the next day in my glutes and hamstrings. This time, the next day I felt...nothing."

Valerie works hard to strike a balance between her CrossFit training and her grappling and jiu-jitsu training. She trains at Petranek Fitness three times a week and trains in grappling and jiu-jitsu up to six times a week. At times she is aware that she is training more efficiently than others and is taking a lesson from CrossFit and learning to take rest days and make her work days more effective and efficient.

Prior to a competition, Valerie tries to train lighter. If a competition is on Saturday she will train lightly from Tuesday forward, and usually take a couple of days off prior to the tournament. She finds the challenge in tapering is not a physical one, but learning to balance the psychological fear of losing her knowledge with being properly rested.





## Jiu-Jitsu Journey (continued...)

On the days she does not train grappling, Valerie has begun teaching beginner classes at New Breed Academy. She has an apartment now and no longer lives in the gym. The competition in Turkey, in some ways, has been the culmination of Valerie's journey. It is the validation of her philosophy and her training. It is the answer to the many voices that said, "What are you going to do? Why are you doing this?" Had Valerie tried to plot a course for herself, the destination of standing on the podium in Turkey listening to the National Anthem while watching her flag being raised would not have been on the map. Of her accomplishments, Valerie says, "If you can get out of your own way, then you can end up in a pretty cool spot."

As Valerie contemplates what may happen next, she continues her journey. Perhaps not geographically, but she continues to explore the worlds of jiu-jitsu and CrossFit. She finds they intersect in both physical and psychological ways. There is a stripping-down of the ego that happens in both worlds. "If you come in and you think you want to be an ultimate fighter and then some chick who's smaller than you triangles the crap out of you and you have to tap to her, you have a decision to make at that point: you can either see the value of the art, or you can let your ego get in the way." For those who choose to let the ego go, the rewards of physical challenge can be immense. "While I'm being humbled, I'm still being encouraged," says Valerie of her CrossFit training. "Even though I may not be able to do as many unassisted pull-ups as somebody else, when I get a personal record other people are happy for me, and that makes me happy for myself, because I realize it's not about comparing myself to somebody else, it's about comparing myself to who I was yesterday and being better than that."



Photo courtesy of AliciaPhotos.com



Becca Borawski teaches and trains at [Petranek Fitness/CrossFit Los Angeles](#) in Santa Monica. She has a master's degree in film from the University of Southern California and a background in martial arts training. She has blended these skills together to produce DVDs and build websites for professional fighters. Her main job is as the music editor on the TV show "Scrubs" and she currently trains jiu-jitsu under Eddie Bravo at 10th Planet Jiu-Jitsu in Hollywood.