

HANGING UP

A LEGEND IN THE CROSSFIT COMMUNITY, CHRIS SPEALLER BIDS FAREWELL TO CROSSFIT GAMES COMPETITION IN 2014.

ANDRÉA MARIA CECIL EXAMINES THE MAN AND THE MYTH.

HIS SHOES

BY ANDRÉA MARIA CECIL

It was Oct. 8, 1966, a Saturday. Iowa State University faced the University of Kansas in the Big 8 football conference.

The Cyclones had been having kickoff trouble, and the team was about to unveil its new weapon: a 5-foot-5 man weighing 126 lb. Like his teammates, he wore a regulation helmet, jersey and shoulder pads. But instead of regulation knee-length football pants, which were all too big for him, he wore blue shorts.

“You really couldn’t blame the 22,000 fans for roaring with laughter here Saturday,” read the 1966 article in the Carrol Daily Times Herald. “But hilarity yielded to respect as the 21-year-old sophomore rammed the ball off the side of his foot soccer style in a boot that sailed deep into Jayhawk territory.”

The Cyclones’ new kicker had two more good kickoffs that day, scored a 36-yard field goal and succeeded on his only extra-point attempt. Iowa State had its first victory of the season.

The performance caught the attention of Sports Illustrated:

“Strange things were going on in the Big Eight. Missouri trouncing Kansas State 27-0 was routine, but Iowa State trotted out a scrawny 5-foot-5, 130-pound sandlot soccer player who had kicked his first football only eight days earlier to help it beat Kansas 24-7.”

That kicker was also a Division 1 track-and-field athlete and gymnast. He went on to kick in a few preseason games for the Dallas Cowboys in 1967 and later made the U.S. field-hockey team. His name: Dave Spealler.

If it sounds familiar, it should. Spealler, now 69, is father of CrossFit legend Chris Spealler.

“There was nothing I couldn’t do athletically except for dunk a basketball, and basketball’s dumb anyway,” Dave quipped with a smile.

Leading up to this year’s CrossFit Games South West Regional, the older Spealler expounded upon his experience being a small athlete over a quinoa salad and a beer at Squatters brewpub in Park City, Utah.

Spend some time with Dave and it’s easy to see from where Chris’ mentality comes, though the younger Spealler said he’s a good blend of both of his parents.

“My dad is so confident, if he loses he thinks it’s a fluke,” he said after his final regional training session at his affiliate, CrossFit Park City. His mother, meanwhile, is shy, a thinker.

The younger Spealler—5 foot 5 and 150 lb.—has inspired countless in the global CrossFit community by doing things he shouldn’t be able to do on paper.

“It doesn’t even register that I look so different,” said Spealler, known as “Speal” since his college days of Division 1 wrestling at Loch Haven University in Pennsylvania.

“When I see a guy who’s 190 lb. lift, I think, ‘Dang it, I should be able to lift that.’”

ONE MORE

This year is Spealler’s final one competing at the CrossFit Games. Unlike 2012, when he made the same announcement, this year it’s definitive.

“I could keep trying and get more banged up,” Spealler started, then added, “I’m ready this year, but the next two years—it’s just not worth it.”

The 35-year-old has been competing as an elite CrossFit athlete for nearly a decade. This will be his seventh Games—a distinction he shares with only Jason Khalipa and Becca Voigt. With the exception of 2013, he’s competed in every edition of the Games. He ran through the hills in Aromas, California—where the Games began—and saw his best finish in 2010, when he placed third behind champion Graham Holmberg and then-rookie Rich Froning.

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I should be able to lift that.’”

—Chris Spealler

“I really want to go back to the Games again, and I think the reason why (is because) I have to make this my last year,” Spealler said three days before the regional. “Part of it is I don’t do it just for fun. CrossFit’s fun, but let’s be real: Training for the Games or training to win the Games isn’t always fun. I don’t care what you say.”

For his own health and that of his family and gym, he will forego elite-level competition after the Games in July 2014.

“And, truthfully, it’s selfish at this point . . . Sarah has given up so much,” Spealler said of his wife.

Throughout the years of competition and Chris’ time away from home on the weekends to teach CrossFit Level 1 Seminars, Sarah has remained behind to care for the couple’s two children, 4-year-old Roark and 2-year-old Myla.

Pointing to his oldest, who was racing around the gym on a Razor mini scooter, Spealler continued, “He has one more year before (kindergarten).”

It’s time.

“I don’t want to look back when I’m older and (regret) never hanging up my shoes to give them the spotlight,” he said, watching his children dart around the



Roark and Dave Spealler at the South West Regional.

gym, hang from gymnastics rings and swing from the climbing rope.

When he walks around his house at night, his body creaks, and the fingerprint reader on the family’s gun safe no longer recognizes his dry, peeling thumbs, Sarah said.

When you’re Spealler and you have to lift seemingly impossibly heavy weights just to be able to compete right beside other elite-level men who are roughly 5 inches taller and 50 lb. heavier, it takes its toll on the body, explained Matt Chan, Spealler’s friend who serves with him on CrossFit’s Level 1 Seminar Staff and as an instructor for CrossFit’s Competitor’s Course. Chan has competed at the Games six times.

“Dude is pretty damn beat up,” he said. “That’s not normal.”

Sarah has told her husband, “Babe, I don’t want you to be broken.”

Still, that week before the regional was an emotional one for Chris and Sarah.

“Heading into the weekend, it was bittersweet,” she said after her husband placed second.

Tears were shed.

“Whether I go to the Games or not, it’s the last time I’ll ever get ready for

regionals in this gym,” Spealler had said, sitting on a black weight bench the day before the competition.

He reminisced on CrossFit’s humble beginnings and its explosive growth, and, unprompted, expressed his appreciation for the community that has shown him so much affection over the years.

“What a blessing to be able to inspire a community like that.”

SPEAL VS. GOLIATH

When the top men’s heat walked onto the competition floor at this year’s South West Regional, the emcee introduced them one by one. It was easy to identify where friends and family were seated—it was the section in the stands cheering the loudest at that moment. But when the emcee spoke the words “Chris Spealler,” the entire venue erupted into borderline-deafening roars.

Such were all three days at the South Towne Exposition Center in Sandy, Utah.

Spealler’s coach, Ben Bergeron, had some insight.

“I heard the commentators during the live feed say it’s because he gives his all during every workout. I disagree with that. I know for a fact that he doesn’t do that. He’s smart. He will save it for the next workout.”



Somehow Spealler got a sled loaded with 385 lb. moving at the CrossFit Games in 2011.

Bergeron continued: “No one’s better at emptying the tank, and if it means breaking bones, (he’ll break bones). It’s when he needs to give everything he has that he does.”

It’s a classic David-and-Goliath tale, just as the Chris Spealler Rogue T-shirt depicts.

“He has to do the impossible every time he competes against 195-lb. men who can handle that weight much easier,” Chan said.

According to physics, many of the movements Spealler performs shouldn’t be possible with his frame, he added.

At the 2011 Games, the final day’s first event required men to push a dog sled loaded with 385 lb. 40 feet across the tennis-stadium floor for 3 rounds at the then-Home Depot Center in Carson, California.

In the warm-up area, Spealler didn’t get to practice with the sled. When he faced it on the competition floor, he pushed it for the first time to no avail.

Finally, he was able to get the stubborn beast to relinquish, but only for a few feet. He tried again, managing a shorter distance. Larger athletes—including Khalipa and Holmberg—seemed to race past him in the first round. Then, suddenly, spectators began to cheer in unison.

“He just folded himself in half to make that happen,” Chan remembered.

With his head low on the sled and the upright push bars just below the outside of his shoulders so he nearly bent himself into the shape of a horseshoe, Spealler coaxed the sled 40 feet. And then again in the second round. And another time in the third. He finished second in his heat—only 4 seconds behind Pat Barber. Khalipa, meanwhile, finished 12 seconds later.

“You look at him and you think, ‘Man, these weights are going to break him,’” Chan said. He added, “It’s just one of those things that you see somebody doing that and you think, ‘I need to step up my game.’”

But Spealler’s struggles resonate beyond elite-level competition. And beyond gender.



During the final event of the 2008 CrossFit Games, Spealler chose “God Will Lift up Your Head” by Jars of Clay to get him through 30 clean and jerks at 155 lb.

The day before the regional, Spealler was coaching at his box. During the 9:30-a.m. class, 32-year-old mom Kara Cordray was bemoaning the workout. It called for 5 rounds of 10 front-rack lunges at 85 lb., 5 front squats and 15 box jumps.

That’s 50 lunges, she noted in near disbelief.

“It’s not 50. It’s only 10. Der—don’t add it up like that,” a facetious Spealler said.

Seconds before the workout began, he had more advice.

“If I was in your class, I would be thinking, ‘Holy crap, I’m going to rip the face off this workout.’”

After it was over, the sarcastic gratitude rolled in.

“Thanks for that, Chris,” said one woman.

“Anytime, anytime,” he quickly replied.

Without finishing his thought, he added, “Get ready because if your butt’s sore now, the next three days.”

Spealler is good at making the workout lighthearted and “pushing each person individually,” said Cordray, who began CrossFit in May 2013.

“He has funny quips that he sticks in, for sure.”

At that point, Cordray had only seen Spealler compete once—at the 2013 South West Regional.

“It was really inspiring,” she said. “His story is the underdog story. That’s really inspiring . . . for me—I’ve never had muscle.”

THE FINAL REGIONAL

Before the regional began, Spealler knew he’d have to climb out of a hole after the opening event; it called for a max squat snatch from the hang. In the previous three weeks, competitors had approached 300 lb. with their lifts.



Spealler saved some energy to lift Myla and Roark during the 2014 South West Regional.

“I really need to focus on what I can do,” he had said three days earlier.

He had already jokingly told his wife, “If I don’t go (to the Games), I’ll cause a ruckus.”

What ended up happening was anything but.

He tied for 28th place in the snatch, lifting 220 lb.—just 5 lb. below the PR snatch he recorded at the 2012 South West Regional. There, he snatched the weight from the floor and barely edged out Matt Hathcock to qualify for his sixth Games. At the 2011 Games, he snatched 205 lb. from the floor. Today, his max snatch is 230 lb.

After that, Spealler placed second in the handstand-walk event and won Nasty Girls V2. At the end of Day 1, he sat in fifth place overall.

“He’s in a better position than I thought he would be. I thought he was gonna just punt the snatch into the stands after Event 1, maybe be in the 30s,” said Pat Sherwood, a longtime friend of Spealler’s, on the “CrossFit Games Update” at CrossFit Inc. headquarters in Santa Cruz, California.

Even Spealler’s dad was surprised.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” Dave said after walking down from the stands at the regional.

“Never count ‘im out,” his mother, Jill, replied.

“I hope he makes it back to the Games,” his dad added.

Day 2 promised heavy front squats in Event 4 and legless rope climbs in Event 5, and also 6-foot-1, 210-lb. Tommy Hackenbruck. After leading a team that recorded the first consecutive Affiliate Cup wins at the Games, the 32-year-old had decided to compete as an individual in 2014.

“The front squat will be heavy for Speal, but he’ll work it,” Sherwood offered on the show. “And then the man who has over 100 kipping pull-ups, I’m here to tell ya, does not fear a legless rope climb. So Day 2 looks really good for Chris.”

It was so.

Spealler won Event 4 and tied for third in Event 5, beating Hackenbruck by 3 seconds on the latter event after nearly matching him pull for pull on the 10-round rope-climb event.

At the end of Day 2, Spealler sat in second place overall.

“In case ya hadn’t heard, now ya heard! @CSpealler isn’t here to shake hands and kiss babies. #Spealler,” read Chan’s tweet as he watched the live stream of his home regional from the stands at the Northern California Regional.

At CrossFit HQ, Sherwood and co-host Sean Woodland were impressed.

“His story is the underdog story.
That’s really inspiring ... for me.”
—Kara Cordray

“At the beginning of the weekend, we figured that Spealler would have to work his way over a period of time into the top three. We didn’t think the period of time would be two events in one day,” Woodland told Sherwood on the show.

Sherwood replied: “He’s blowing my mind. If there was a shot, I thought maybe it’d be this crazy Day 3 comeback, but sitting in second place going into Day 3—I gotta admit, I never saw it coming.”

When Day 3 arrived, Spealler wowed the crowd as he worked his way through Event 6—unofficially known as “the 50s”—with a Tabata timer strapped around his left arm to ensure he did 20 seconds of work and 10 seconds of rest on the movements sandwiched between rowing. The event called for:

- 50-calorie row
- 50 box jump overs (24 inches)
- 50 deadlifts (180 lb.)
- 50 wall-ball shots (20 lb., 10 feet)
- 50 ring dips
- 50 wall-ball shots (20 lb., 10 feet)
- 50 deadlifts (180 lb.)
- 50 box jump overs (24 inches)
- 50-calorie row

Bergeron hatched the Tabata idea after seeing Spealler perform the event at his affiliate, CrossFit New England. There, Spealler didn’t make it back to the rower. At the regional, he did.

Earlier on Day 3, Dave had made a prediction.

“This won’t be a good event for him,” he said of the 50s.

“The bigger guys” will be better on the rower and the wall balls, Dave said.

And Event 7?

“That’s heavy for him,” he said, referencing the 8 205-lb. overhead squats.

Instead, Spealler took fourth overall in Event 6 and sixth overall in Event 7, besting younger, heavier and taller men. Meanwhile, spectators from CrossFit Park City waved a green banner that read “Cerebral Assassin,” a reference to the Tabata strategy.

One person who certainly wasn’t surprised was Eric O’Connor.

Three days before the regional, Spealler’s lifelong friend predicted Spealler would “start out behind.”

“If he can get (the snatch) in the top 25, that’s actually a good thing because of the way people are now—they’re all just freaks,” said the ever-sarcastic O’Connor, also a CrossFit Park City coach who is a member of the Level 1 Seminar Staff.

Every other event, he said, will either be a top-five finish or a win.

“The last event will be tricky,” he said, referencing the overhead squats that were 55 lb. over Spealler’s body weight.

O’Connor continued, thinking out loud through the regional’s seven events: “Technically, he’s more sound than everyone else. He’ll do well at that. He’ll pace himself well.”

He finally concluded: “I totally expect him to qualify for the Games.”

When all was said and done, Spealler reflected on his second-place performance at a mostly empty exposition center.

“I wanted to do what I was capable of, and that was it,” he said with a relaxed smile.

Regardless of what happens at the Games, he said he was thankful for the opportunity to be able to say goodbye and close this chapter of his life.

“It’s really surreal right now.”

BIG SIS

Spealler was in third grade when the kid he was wrestling broke his arm—allegedly on purpose—during a match. What happened next surprised even his parents.

Julie, his older sister of two years, bolted out of the stands and onto the mat.

“We had to pull her off,” Dave remembered, laughing.

Fifth-grader Julie was yelling at her brother’s opponent.

“He’s my little brother, so I definitely get protective,” explained Julie Spealler Weldon more recently.

“Ever since then, she can’t watch,” Jill said.

If you see Weldon in the stands at all while her brother is competing, she’s likely to be covering her face as if she were watching a horror movie.

“I have been known to leave the StubHub Center and sit somewhere on the steps and plug my ears,” she said.

Except for this year.

“That’s the first time I’ve watched him compete in a CrossFit workout,” said the 37-year-old mother, herself a two-time regional competitor.

At the Games, she intends to do the same.

“I’m super excited to watch him,” she said.

For her, all the hullabaloo about her kid brother sometimes seems peculiar.

“I’ve seen him in his underwear. We were hitting each other with lamps,” she said, laughing.

And his inspiration of a global community is one she both understands and shrugs off.

“For me, it’s like, well, of course he would do that. That’s what he does. Why are you expecting something different?”

“They love him because of what he embodies, his ability to inspire people and what he represents.”
—Julie Spealler Weldon

Spealler has been like that since he was a child.

“Ever since he was little, he’s always done what he was not supposed to do,” Weldon explained.

Her brother wrestled up a weight class, sometimes two.

“So I got used to that from him. I mean, it’s amazing. But that’s what my brother does.”

As for this being his last year competing at the Games, Weldon supports her brother’s decision.

“I think it’s a good decision. I think it’s gonna be really hard for him to

... transition,” she said. “I’m really hoping that he can feel satisfied with where he finishes as far as the Games this year.”

And although her brother’s perspective has changed from “I’m going to win. I’m not going to have fun” to enjoying the moment, his performance will be no different.

“He won’t give any less than 110 percent even though his perspective has changed,” Weldon said. “So it’s not like you’ll see a different athlete at the Games. You’ll still see Chris Spealler.”

More importantly, however, she said she wants her brother to realize the real reason why people love him.

“They love him because of what he embodies, his ability to inspire people and what he represents—that’s way more important to me than being able to do 100 pull-ups.”

THE INSPIRED AND THE ANNOYED

Still, for what some find inspiring, others find comically annoying.

It’s the attitude and the effort that inspire, O’Connor, who wrestled with Spealler in college, said days before the regional.

He quickly added with a sneer: “To me, I expect it from him. For me, I’m not shocked. I just get annoyed by it.”

More recently, Sherwood shared an interaction with Spealler that occurred over text message. Speal was excited to share a 225-lb. thruster done in the middle of a workout.

The 5-foot-8, 190-lb. Sherwood was not amused.

“I’m not even happy for you,” he replied.

But that’s just Speal.

“If you’re 5-5, in your mid-30s, 150 lb. on a heavy day and you legitimately strike a little bit of fear into people like Khalipa or (Scott) Panchik, and they’re like, ‘Oh fuck, Speal’s here,’ that’s pretty cool,” Sherwood said, smiling.

Dave said it more succinctly: “If you think it’s the end, he’s gonna go harder.”

Sherwood first met Spealler in 2007.

“I put him through his Level 1 in Golden, Colorado, at the Highway Patrol Center,” he remembered.

On the first day, the workout at the time was an AMRAP involving thrusters and pull-ups—though it wasn’t Fran. Spealler started with a breakneck

pace. Sherwood and his cohorts had done so many seminars they were jokingly waiting for Spealler to crash and burn.

“Oh, look at this guy going like a bat out of hell and he’s a little guy,” they quipped.

The joke was on them.

“He just kept that fuckin’ ridiculous pace,” Sherwood recalled. “Everyone knew his name at the end of that—that was Chris Spealler.”

Both O’Connor and Sherwood said Spealler is one of the most mentally tough people they’ve ever known.

“He can just push really, really, really hard by himself, at 6 a.m., with no one watching,” Sherwood said. “He can go as hard as people can go at regionals.”

Spealler also has the ability to not only say to himself he’s going to beat his opponent but also to make himself believe he will beat his opponent.

“And it’s really tough to beat somebody who thinks like that,” Sherwood said. “If you falter, he’ll get you.”

In the process, Spealler is maxing his human potential.

“He’s the best-case scenario. He’s operating at what peak performance would be if everything’s firing as it should be,” Sherwood said.

Likewise, his absence from competition will be felt.

“That’ll be a hole that I don’t see anybody else filling,” Sherwood said.

He added: “What that does, I don’t know. He’s definitely not replaceable.”

Spealler will also feel a void.

“I want to do stuff that I shouldn’t be able to do. That’s what I’ll miss the most—more than the experience and everything. I think that’s why people ... connect with me. I really don’t care if you’re 200 or 220. I really don’t care if you’re this or that. I’m gonna try.”

About the Author

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