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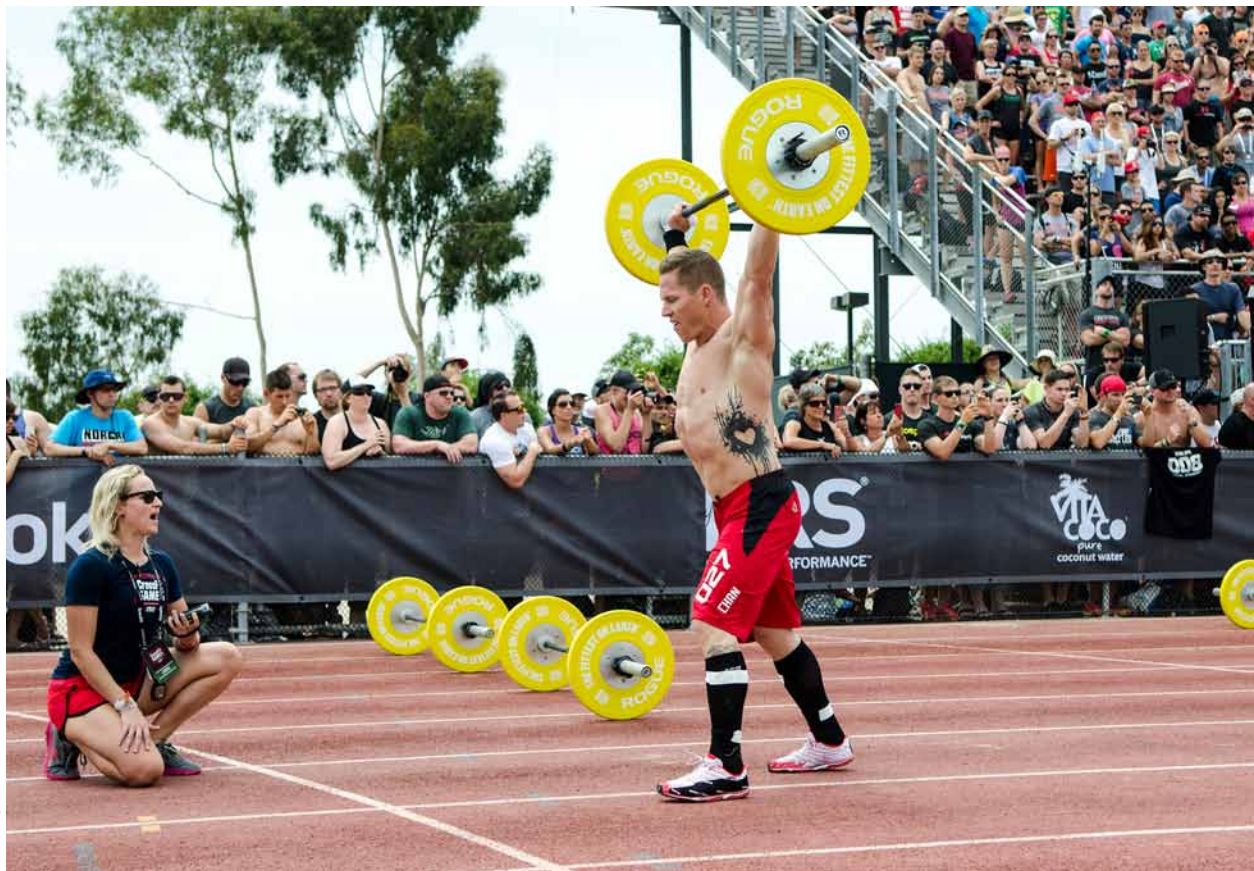
## Losing Control, Winning a Medal

Games veteran Matt Chan cedes control of his programming to someone else and has his best CrossFit Games finish in five years of competition.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

If Matt Chan's second-place finish at this year's CrossFit Games was a surprise, it shouldn't have been.



***At the Regional level, Chan has been dominant in winning the South West competition every year.***

"I've been doing this for a long time," said Chan, who has competed in the Games since 2008. "If I snuck up on people, (I) shouldn't have ... I've been in the top 10."

Indeed, Chan finished eighth in 2008, 18th in 2009, fourth in 2010 and 10th in 2011.

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**—Matt Chan**

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"I don't think it should have been a surprise to people that I finished in the top three," Chan added. "And I'll tell you right now, I expect to be in the top three again next year."

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**—Joe Alexander  
on agreeing to  
coach Matt Chan**

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But at least one person was a bit taken aback by Chan's performance: his coach.

"He kind of surprised me along the way. I really think his conditioning paid off," Joe Alexander said.

"I knew he was prepared. I didn't quite anticipate that he was going to be so robust. It was surprising how well it transferred over. I'd be lying if I said I knew precisely how he would respond to the volume."

A site supervisor for CrossFit Level 1 seminars, Alexander is pensive, analytical and humble. His approach to Chan's training was equally methodical. So much so that he didn't immediately agree to coach the CrossFit Verve owner without careful thought.

"Nobody wants to send someone backwards," Alexander explained. "I did feel that performance pressure. Here was a guy that had a history of success for the last four years and the only variable that was changing in his life was me."

### **Relinquishing Control**

In the year leading up to the Games, Chan made several changes.

"The first thing I did is I took my own training and my own programming and handed it over to someone I trusted and respected," he said.



***In 2012, Chan had his best finish at the CrossFit Games: second.***

In August of last year—shortly after the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games—Chan asked Alexander to be his coach. Alexander didn't immediately agree.

"I told him I wanted to think about it a little bit. I knew it was going to be a massive commitment ... because of how long he'd been training and competing," he said. "I wanted to make sure I wasn't biting off more than I could chew."

After two weeks of deliberation, Alexander agreed.

"It was a huge privilege and I said, 'Why not?'"

And so the number crunching began.

"I grabbed as much data as I could from a month, as many benchmarks as I could, and tried to get a picture of what he looked like in terms of his capacity," Alexander said. "I looked for holes, gaps."

The ensuing analysis was "massive."

"It took hours and hours to sort all that out," Alexander said. "I restructured the plan from there."

The data revealed that Chan, a member of the Level 1 Seminar Staff, was "really strong" but lacked in stamina and endurance. In the past, the former firefighter had focused on strength, which was easy for him. This time around, it was different.

"I focused more on going longer on workouts," Chan explained.

He did at least one 20-minute-plus workout a week.

"Every week there was two running workouts typically, and it was one in a workout and the other was just training volume of running—running for longer," Chan said.

Alexander started by writing Chan's program a week ahead of time.

"I found that to be a failure because I couldn't project how he was going to respond with the training," he said. "I didn't know when he would need a rest day. If he needed a rest, I wanted him to take it."

So Alexander programmed one day at a time.

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**—Cherie Chan**

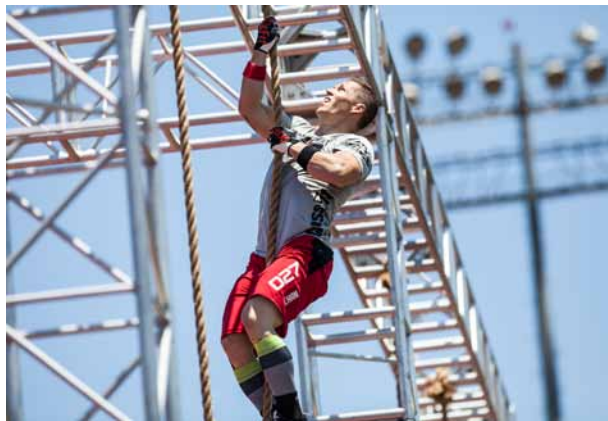
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The workouts didn't reinvent the wheel. Many were from CrossFit.com or "very typical" CrossFit workouts that focused on stamina rather than strength, Chan said.

The athlete also began using Restwise, a recovery-analysis tool based on qualitative and quantitative markers. The software assesses an athlete's condition and provides a score.

"I didn't necessarily train three on, one off," Chan said. "I trained based on my recovery score."

That shook out to be three to four workouts per week most of the time.



***Chan finished first in the Rope-Sled event to set himself up for a podium run in 2012.***

"Stamina, cardiovascular endurance were weaknesses, and I addressed those all year long and got better at them," Chan said.

The 34-year-old also tweaked his recovery and nutrition.

Chan found himself getting "extremely tight" throughout the year, so he was vigilant about mobility. Some of Alexander's programming included movements to improve flexibility.

And after retiring from firefighting in January, he was able to sleep more and consistently.

In terms of nutrition, Chan increased his Zone Diet blocks from 18 to 21.

Chan's wife, Cherie, said her husband has always been dedicated to CrossFit. The major difference she saw this year was that he handed over the reins.

"I think the change was that he relinquished control," she said. "That's not normally what he does."

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Chan gave up so much control that an athlete from CrossFit Verve was charged with timing his warm-ups and his eating at the Games.

"He didn't argue," Cherie said. "He ate what he was supposed to. At one point, he walked on the (competition) floor with a chicken breast on a fork and a banana. He needed someone to tell him, 'I don't care that you feel like shit right now. You need to eat that piece of chicken.'"

### **Realizing More Than the Goal**

The year of work paid off. Chan finished the first part of the Games' two-part opening endurance event—on Wednesday at Camp Pendleton—in third place. He was 17th in Pendleton 2, which was a solid placing for an athlete known more for strength and power than endurance.

"That triathlon normally would have scared the crap out of me," he said three days later, just after the Games' Chipper workout ended on Saturday. He described his prior year's training as a period focused on CrossFit and not "nonsense."

CrossFit competitors, he said that night, should spend time on "what they're not good at."

After the first Pendleton workouts, Chan had several finishes that were all over the board: 17th, 21st, 10th, 24th, 42nd, 11th, eighth, 10th. But he placed second in the Ball Toss event, first in the Rope-Sled workout, second in Elizabeth and third in Isabel.

Spectators started noticing just how close Chan was to the top of the leaderboard during Saturday night's chipper. He remained on the heels of defending champ Rich Froning Jr. until the final few seconds, when Jason Khalipa edged him out for second place overall in the workout.

For his part, Chan took note of how well he was doing on Saturday afternoon.

"I realized I could not only achieve that top-three goal but could probably get second place," he said. "Overall, I'm as happy as I would have (been had I) won. I'm ecstatic about it."

That sentiment was evident as Chan stepped up onto the second-place box Sunday afternoon. His ear-to-ear grin was almost goofy—and contagious. It was nearly impossible not to smile, too.

"I think it's outstanding," Alexander said. "He's a fantastic competitor. And in that environment he does not choke. When it's time to perform, he performs."

A judge at the Games, Alexander couldn't coach Chan during the competition because it would have been a conflict of interest. So Alexander snuck peaks at the leaderboard and tried to talk to Cherie whenever he could.

"I pretty much knew where he was," he said. "At the end of (Saturday), I realized he was going to make the podium."



*Always a strong, powerful athlete, Chan made sure his endurance was dialed in for 2012.*

### The Road to 2013

The year ahead will bring few changes for Chan.

"I'm going to keep following the same model. I asked Joe if he would work with me again this year," he said five days after the Games ended. "That's the plan—is to continue to work on weaknesses."

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In patented form, Alexander did not rapidly sign on to coach Chan for a second year. He waited four days before agreeing.

"I know more now than I did before," Alexander said. "Picking up where we left off is a lot less challenging than starting from scratch."

Plus, he added, he was "pretty impressed" with Chan's performance.

"Well, damn," Alexander jokingly said, "we can certainly do that."

There will be no dramatic changes in programming, he noted.

"One thing I will do is that last year I didn't worry a whole lot about strength," Alexander said. "What I am going to do this year in the off-season (August and September) is I'm going to let him play with the heavy weight, do things he enjoys so we can kind of rehab the body a little bit."

He added: "Even though it was a strong point for him, if it's neglected for too long he can lose that edge."

One thing that will change is how coaching is delivered.

Alexander recently moved from the Denver area, where he coached at CrossFit Verve, to Charlotte, N.C., to be closer to family.

The two men plan to see each other for several days at a time several times throughout the year, Alexander said. And Chan will video selected workouts for review.

Alexander called the experience of working with Chan "a real privilege."

"He was the first guy that I seriously coached," he said.

Being a so-called "flowmaster" for Level 1 seminars, Alexander said he is in a unique position as he has contact with "so many fantastic coaches" and access to "a huge amount of information."

"It gives you like a 1,000-foot perspective of the landscape," he explained. "It makes you question what you're doing, but you also get great ideas."



**Chan finished third in the Pendleton 1 event to start off the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games.**

As he trained Chan, Alexander encouraged him to seek out Greg Amundson for mental coaching and Kelly Starrett for mobility work.

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“You need to know what you don’t know,” Alexander said. “You have to put pride on the back burner because what it comes down to is giving the athlete the best of what they need.”

#### **A Better Athlete**

With his second-place finish, Chan became the oldest individual male competitor to ever medal at the Games.

“I think it’s a testament to CrossFit to be 34 years old and still have the ability to be one of the fittest human beings on Earth. And I’m not doing anything special. I’m doing CrossFit.com programming,” Chan said.

“I’m willing to work harder at something that I hold near and dear to my heart, and that’s CrossFit Games competition. I live for it right now. Thirty-four, 40—I’m going to keep going for it.”

Alexander said he couldn’t have been happier when Chan showed up “as the best version of himself” at the South West Regional and the Games.

“That’s cool,” he said. “I did my job.”

What made Chan successful, Alexander noted, is that his eye wasn’t on the carrot. He took both competitions one workout at a time.

“The goal at the end of the year is to improve him,” Alexander said, “make him a better athlete. Whether or not he wins the Regional or is first, second or third at the Games is a byproduct of that. By just trying to improve everything, those things happen. How can they not?”



Courtesy of Andréa Maria Cecil

#### **About the Author:**

*Andréa Maria Cecil was the North East Regional Media Director for the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games. She has been a freelance writer and editor for the **CrossFit Journal** since 2010 and also writes for the CrossFit Games site. Cecil spent nearly 13 years as a professional journalist, most recently as managing editor of the **Central Penn Business Journal** in Harrisburg, Pa. 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**.*