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Slapping Fear in the Face

Deborah Corder Carson successfully battled lymphedema and a fear of water to win the Spirit of the Games Award at the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games. Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

Tyler Quinn lay in his bed, hanging on to every word announcers Justin Judkins and Sean Woodland uttered.

"I was in my room listening to the stream and holding my breath," he said.

More than 50 minutes into the phonecast of the Camp Pendleton swim-bike-run that opened the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games, Judkins described Deborah Corder Carson as "still battling those waves" and "battling the surf."

"I didn't know if she was standing in the water or actually swimming," said Quinn, Corder Carson's coach.

Last year, the athlete withdrew from the Games in the opening event that also included an ocean swim because of her fear of open water.

Less than a minute later, Quinn heard the magic words come from Woodland's mouth: "Deborah Corder, we just heard, has actually rounded the last buoy. She is coming out of the water. She finished the event. She's obviously out of contention for this one, but huge, huge victory—personal victory—for Deb Corder because, again, if she had tapped out, it's over."

Quinn slammed his pillow.

"To us in Minnesota, it was a pretty exciting moment," he said. "I don't care if it's a fear of spiders or a fear of falling or a fear of waves and you get over it—it's a gigantic victory. We're all excited for her."

Finishing the swim, Cordner Carson said, was indeed “awesome.”

“I think I’d be foolish if I said that I’ve completely overcome it.”
—Deborah Cordner Carson on her fear of open water

She thought to herself, “I get to actually continue and compete in the CrossFit Games for the first time! It was really cool!”

Still, Cordner Carson’s fear hasn’t been vanquished.

“I think I’d be foolish if I said that I’ve completely overcome it. It was one ocean, one day at the CrossFit Games that I made it through,” she said. “I can’t pretend that that didn’t happen last year.”

A Respect for the Water

Cordner Carson’s parents are from Trinidad. Nearly seven miles off the northeastern coast of Venezuela, the island is surrounded by the Caribbean Sea, the North Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Paria. Although she was born in Minnesota, she visited Trinidad as a child with her family.

“My uncle is a great swimmer,” she said. “He can kill a shark with a spear.”

As a little girl, Cordner Carson went for a fearless, carefree dip in the waters off Trinidad. She saw a wave coming but didn’t think too much of it.

“I got pummeled,” she recounted. “I remember not knowing what was up or down.”

Her aunt plucked her from the water.

“What are you doing?” the adult asked her.

Like most children, Cordner Carson didn’t have a good answer.

“This is no joke,” she recalled thinking. “You don’t just jump in here thinking you can swim.”

And so her view on the water changed.

“At that point, I had a healthy respect for the ocean,” Cordner Carson said.

She paused and then added: “Was it that? Maybe. I just never had much practice.”

Immediately after last year’s Games—when Cordner Carson took herself out of contention by withdrawing from the opening event at the Santa Monica Pier—she went home to Minnesota and started swimming.

She joined a swim class that met at 5:30 a.m. twice a week.

“I was getting more comfortable in the pool,” she said. “Once it got (warmer) in Minnesota, I went to the lakes.”

But in the open water, the form she had honed in the pool faltered.

“It was really discouraging because I had hopes I would get in and be amazing or something,” she said with a laugh. “In the middle of a lake, you don’t have an option: you would either swim or die.”



The crashing waves of the Pacific were terrifying to Cordner Carson, who had difficulty getting through her practice sessions in Minnesota’s calm lakes.

Mentally, Cordner Carson said, she would almost sabotage herself in the open water and begin hyperventilating.

“It made me nervous for the Games,” she added.

Judgment Day

When Games Director Dave Castro announced the surprise swim-bike-run that would kick off the Games two days before their expected start on July 13, Cordner Carson “passed over the swim part in my head.”

"I didn't want to think about it until I got back to my hotel room and was with people I felt comfortable expressing my emotions with," she explained.

What ensued was a snowballing fear that consumed the 32-year-old.

The swim was about 700 meters total, running out from the beach at Camp Pendleton, then turning parallel to the shore for the bulk of the distance before heading back to the beach. The route was marked with buoys, and a host of support personnel dotted the ocean on paddleboards and watercraft.

"I was thinking of the distance in my head: 'OK, I know what 400 meters is. I know what that looks like,'" the former college sprinter said to herself. "I don't know how I can swim that long."

The day before the event, Castro and Marine Capt. Greg Johnson from Camp Pendleton briefed athletes on what to expect. Johnson talked about rip currents, rocks, sharks and other dangers to keep in mind.

"They made it sound horrible," Corder Carson recalled. "Everybody was kind of laughing, kind of scared. ... I don't think anybody took it to the level I did."

So when Cherie Chan, a media commentator during the Games, asked to talk to her, Corder Carson declined an interview for the first time. She was on the verge of tears and hadn't slept because she had been up all night texting Quinn, who was still in Minnesota.



Corder Carson, overcome with fear, was on the verge of withdrawing from the Games for a second time.

At that point, Corder Carson fully expected to withdraw from the Games for a second year.

"I didn't want to be a horrible example of a CrossFit athlete. I felt like I was just letting everybody down."

—Deborah Corder Carson

"We prayed and did everything, and I just came to terms with the fact that, you know what, it sucks this is going to happen again. My fear is going to overcome me, and unfortunately this is going to happen again," she said. "I didn't want to be a horrible example of a CrossFit athlete. I felt like I was just letting everybody down."

The hour and a half bus ride from the Los Angeles area to Camp Pendleton was silent.

Corder Carson was absorbed in her thoughts—and her fear.

"There was a little part of me that was like, 'Maybe you can do this. It's not so bad.' Then there's another part of me that was like, 'Are you kidding? You can't do this!'"

As she talked to one CrossFit employee after another, each one said the same thing: Yes, you can.

"No one would let me quit. That's what it felt like," Corder Carson said. "At one point, it felt like, 'You can't make me do this.'"

In one way, she felt embarrassed.

"The one time I ever made it on national television, it was you seeing me fail and crumble over something I wasn't able to do," she said, referring to the 2011 Games aired on ESPN platforms. "If it happened again, it would just be so hard."

Moments before the event, with waves crashing in the distance, Corder Carson was all but ready to withdraw. She spoke with CrossFit staff member Angel Forbes, who said she should talk to Castro. During a quick meeting on the beach, Castro told Corder Carson she had to try.

Then Cordner Carson started to think, “Why is my ego getting in the way of me trying, at least? How am I letting all this hoopla of how big CrossFit has gotten ... get in the way of who I am?”

**“I was like, ‘Yeah, I’ll try.
What the hell, Deborah? Try.’
So, yeah, I tried.”**

—Deborah Cordner Carson

So she made a decision.

“I was like, ‘Yeah, I’ll try. What the hell, Deborah? Try.’ So, yeah, I tried,” she said. “I took it one step at a time—literally. I got into the ocean very slowly and tentatively.”

Cordner Carson was dead last on the swim. She didn’t care. “One little tiny stroke at a time,” she made her way through the ocean.

Between the third and fourth buoy, she could see the other competitors hopping on their bikes.

“I couldn’t believe I was actually going to make it,” she said. But what followed wasn’t exactly a walk in the park.

The leg garment she wears because of her lymphedema was wet, meaning it was no longer effectively providing the compression she needed. Lymphedema is a condition where lymphatic fluid accumulates in the interstitial tissue and causes swelling, most often in arms and legs.

“I had to just suck it up,” Cordner Carson explained. “That’s one of the reasons why I never swam really after lymphedema.”



Once the swim was out of the way, Cordner Carson made up ground on the bike and the run despite the pain in her leg.

The bike ride was lonely for a while. The run—typically her strength—was the most difficult because of the pain in her leg.

Still, Corder Carson managed to catch up to some of the other competitors and even give them pointers on running.

When she finished the swim-bike-run event, her body started cramping uncontrollably. Intravenous fluids from the medical staff helped.

“It’s an award that stands for more than just the competition ... this is the foundation of CrossFit.”

—Tyler Quinn on Deborah Corder Carson receiving the Spirit of the Games Award

“I would never advocate anyone with lymphedema doing that,” Corder Carson said.

Nonetheless, CrossFit, she said, forced her to make it all work despite her condition.

“It’s nice not to make excuses,” Corder Carson said. “It’s just another thing I can do now with lymphedema, so that’s cool.”

Her courage in the face of fear and adversity earned her this year’s Spirit of the Games Award, following such CrossFit legends as Annie Sakamoto in 2011 and Chris Spealler in 2010.

“It was pretty unbelievable,” Corder Carson said. “I mean it’s hard to put into words.”

Although Corder Carson doesn’t wear her emotions on her sleeve during competition, Quinn said the athlete was tremendously humbled by the award.

“That will be a moment in her life that I don’t think she will ever, ever forget,” he said. “I think she’s really proud to be a part of that. It’s an award that stands for more than just the competition ... this is the foundation of CrossFit.”



Corder Carson earned the Spirit of the Games Award by showing courage, determination and heart.

Managing Fear

Swimming in the ocean, Corder Carson said, has given her confidence not only in tackling water but also other hardships life might throw at her.

“I can do it,” she explained. “It’s going to be hard, it’s going to be really sucky, but it really won’t be that bad.”

Her advice: Take it one step at a time.

With a plan, anticipatory anxiety can be controlled, said David Yukelson, director of sports psychology services for the Morgan Academic Support Center for Student Athletes at Penn State University.

“If it’s really fear of the unknown, fear of the uncertainty—which are sources of the anxiety—you get the athlete to focus on what they have in their immediate control,” he said.



Once on land, Cordner Carson showed off her speed, agility and strength, finishing 13th overall.

Although the fear might be so overwhelming that it triggers physiological responses—such as an elevated heart rate or tense muscles—the goal is to overcome it by redirecting thoughts, Yukelson continued.

“The big thing in controlling it is identifying it and almost slapping the fear in the face.”

—David Yukelson

Mantras, he said, can help:

“Be strong in the water.”

“Trust my technique.”

“It’s a mile and a half—I can do this.”

“The big thing in controlling it is identifying it and almost slapping the fear in the face,” Yukelson explained.

Focus on what you’re going to do and don’t worry about what could go wrong, he said. And, yes, it is possible to overcome a fear, Yukelson said.

“But the person has to have the willingness to address their fears,” he said. “(There must be an) understanding of where the fear is and dealing with it as opposed to being overcome by it.”

He called the preparation “ammunition to be able to fight back” and “the opportunity that I’ve been waiting for.”

Quinn might agree.

After last year, he told Cordner Carson he would be unhappy if there wasn’t a swim at the 2012 Games.

“She was shocked to hear that,” Quinn said.

“Let’s just say you go out there and win the CrossFit Games and didn’t have to swim,” he told her. “Look, we need this. We need this to be part of not your CrossFit experience, but your life experience.”



This year's Games helped Cordner Carson smash her fears and come out a stronger, more confident athlete.

Quinn also said to Cordner Carson: "If you get last place by a mile, I don't care."

But she didn't.

Cordner Carson finished 13th overall in the Games.

Now for 2013

"It was a gigantic step," Quinn said of Cordner Carson's ocean swim. "In another situation, if she had not done the swim and been disqualified from the 2012 Games, I don't think you would have heard much about her next year. We're all pretty excited about this upcoming training year."

"The last two years that she's been out there, she's come back with a better sense of herself as an athlete."

—Tyler Quinn

Needless to say, there will be more open-water swimming in Cordner Carson's future. Triathlons, specifically.

"Just saying that is easy to say, but it still scares me," she noted. "It freaks me out a little bit."

While Cordner Carson is "competent" in the water, she's "still bad at swimming," Quinn said, and that has to change.

"I think Deb is a podium competitor," he said. "And (there are) going to be people out there who disagree with that, but I don't care. I know what she's capable of. The last two years that she's been out there, she's come back with a better sense of herself as an athlete."

Part of that has come through surrounding herself with the right people—people who have "helped me through my fears," Cordner Carson said.

"Certain experiences are put in your way for a reason. Because on the other side . . . you're so much stronger and you're so much closer to the person you've dreamt to be," she said. "I'm so grateful for the person I've become. I never could have dreamt this up in a million years. It makes me almost grateful to have lymphedema in a weird way."

As for 2013, Cordner Carson is expecting even more of herself.

"I don't want to go to the CrossFit Games being scared of anything."



About the Author

*Andréa Maria Cecil is the Regional Community Media Director for the Australia, Europe and North East regions. She was also the North East Regional Media Director for the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games. Cecil has been a freelance writer and editor for the **CrossFit Journal** since 2010 and also writes for the CrossFit Games site. She 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 four days a week to training the Olympic lifts herself at **McKenna's Gym**.*