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## Angles and Demons

Managing stress, anxiety and fear is part of being an elite athlete. Andréa Maria Cecil talks to CrossFit Games competitors and coaches who share their various approaches to fighting inner battles.

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By Andréa Maria Cecil

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All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

You have two choices: continue to wallow or do it again.

“In most situations, you need to challenge fears and redirect to what you can control,” said David Yukelson, director of sports psychology services for the Morgan Academic Support Center for Student Athletes at Penn State University.

Don't allow frustration to undermine confidence, he continued—it can become obsessive and nagging self-doubt. Yukelson calls it “stinkin’ thinkin’.”

“Right then, you need to use mental-preparation techniques,” he said. “That’s when you have to fight back and be resilient.”

In other words, have a plan for composure.

“And a lot of coaches don’t think enough about that,” Yukelson added. “This is a skill.”

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**“I was never really scared.  
It was just, ‘I hate this.’  
I was irritated.”**

**—Heather Gillespie**

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### **“Oh, Whatever. Get It Done.”**

Heather Gillespie compared the swim that started this year’s CrossFit Games to childbirth.

“I cried because I knew I had to get it done, but I had no other choice,” she said. “You get it done and it’s still horrendous.”

The athlete from Lethbridge, Alta., doesn’t exactly like water. She doesn’t fear it; she just finds it highly unpleasant.

“It’s really irritating to me. I don’t like the water. I don’t know how to swim,” Gillespie explains. “I go boating. I don’t get off the boat.”

And taking showers—with water spraying on her—is out of the question.

“I always take a bath,” Gillespie said.

Still, the thought of withdrawing from the Games because of the 700-meter swim did not enter her mind.

Yes, she cried, but she was going to do it no matter what—despite her equal loathing of workouts that take longer than five minutes.

“It didn’t take too much convincing. I was never really scared. It was just, ‘I hate this.’ I was irritated,” Gillespie explained.

At that point, she devised a mental plan: focus on what it will feel like when it’s over and try to keep emotion out of it.

“I do have an OK time shutting down. And maybe that’s what makes me OK physically with CrossFit,” Gillespie said. “I don’t feel sadness.”

Instead, she tells herself, “Oh, whatever. Get it done.”

The worst that could happen, Gillespie thought, was she might not finish.

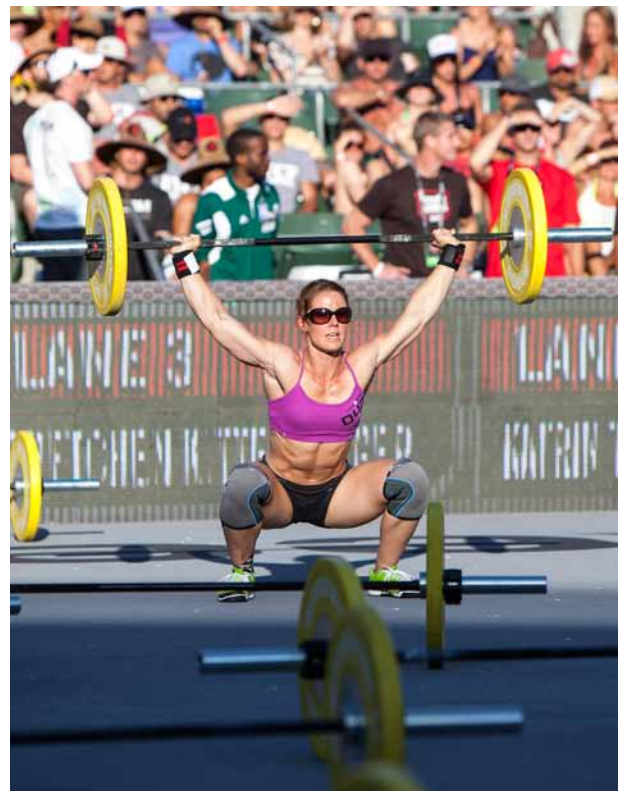
“And in the end, that’s not that bad,” she said.

Gillespie finished both parts of the swim-bike-run at Camp Pendleton in 43rd place.

And even though she said exposure is the best way to vanquish such a goat, she won’t be practicing her swimming.

“I might spend a little time, but, like I said, I hate that water and that’s that. I will take my chances,” Gillespie said. “I know that doesn’t sound like competitive nature.”

If swimming appears at the Games for a third time in 2013 and Gillespie makes it back to the event, she said she’ll deal with it.



***Heather Gillespie made it through the Pendleton race to get back to her comfort zone of brutal, barbell-based chippers.***

"Nothing is ever as bad as (what your mind) makes it," Gillespie said. "I feel like I can do anything. Throw me something I can't do ... I'm not going to be the fastest, but I know my mind and body is stronger than any challenge. And that's the power of CrossFit."

### **"So, Yeah, I Tried"**

Like Gillespie, Deborah Corder Carson didn't like the water.

She, however, feared it.

At last year's Games, the former collegiate sprinter from Minnesota withdrew from the competition because it started with an ocean swim. This year, it was déjà vu.

So when Games Director Dave Castro announced the surprise swim-bike-run event, Corder Carson tried not to think about it. But once she got back to her hotel room with people she felt comfortable expressing her emotions around, fear began consuming her.

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.

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

On the day of the event, Corder Carson was all but ready to withdraw. But as she talked to one CrossFit employee after another, each one said the same thing: "You can do it."



***Corder Carson won the Spirit of the Games Award for the courage and determination she showed in the ocean swim.***

"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.'"

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**"I can do it. It's going to be hard, it's going to be really sucky, but it really won't be that bad."**

**—Deborah Corder Carson**

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She spoke with CrossFit staff member Angel Forbes, who said she should talk to Castro. During a quick meeting on the beach, Castro told her she had to try. The talk seemed to do the trick.

"I was like, 'Yeah, I'll try. What the hell, Deborah? Try.' So, yeah, I tried," Corder Carson said. "I took it one step at a time—literally. I got into the ocean very slowly and tentatively."

She was dead last on the swim and didn't care.

Corder Carson made her way through the ocean "one little tiny stroke at a time."

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.

The experience gave Corder Carson confidence not only in tackling open water but also life's other difficulties.

"I can do it," she said. "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.

### **"I Wanted To Do Well For Him"**

Seeing Lindsey Valenzuela before the Clean Ladder at this year's Games has been described as laying eyes upon "a caged beast."

Beneath the Home Depot Center, she paced in the tunnel where athletes waited to enter the competition floor. The 25-year-old appeared confident as she eyed the sea of bars. The audience expected her to be the first woman to finish the ladder at 235 lb. Valenzuela delivered to the cheers of the crowd.



That confidence, she said, doesn't always come easy.

"I for sure don't always feel confident the days leading up to a competition," Valenzuela said. "I think the biggest fears I have are not achieving the goals I have personally set for myself—(whether) it be going unbroken (in) a movement, getting a certain time on a workout or just where I want to place."

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**"I also think about everyone who has believed in my dreams and also everyone who has told me I couldn't accomplish my dreams."**

**—Lindsey Valenzuela**

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Valenzuela's solution: family. Talking to family members about her anxieties and fears helps to release the tension, she said.

"Once they are talked about I always feel better and more confident," Valenzuela said.

On game day, she focuses on her plan of attack for each workout.

"I also think about everyone who has believed in my dreams and also everyone who has told me I couldn't accomplish my dreams," Valenzuela said. "Those two components give me the right mixture (of) confidence and anger that I need to be fired up before a workout."

Many of her doubts come during long endurance workouts, said Valenzuela, who comes from a volleyball and weightlifting background. The Southern California athlete snatches 195 lb. and clean and jerks 235 lb.

"When I'm training or I'm in the middle of a competition, I think a lot about my family; my husband, Arsenio; and my 92-year-old grandfather," Valenzuela said. "They are the people who have always believed in me and gotten me through hard times."

During the swim-bike-run event, she said she only thought of her grandfather.

"(He) was the only thing I carried in my heart ... because he was in the service and trained on Camp Pendleton back in the day," Valenzuela said. "I wanted to do well for him and all current (and) past service men and women. I felt honored to be competing on their training grounds."

Likewise, she also thinks about the people wearing "Lift like Lindsey" shirts "and how important their support is to me."

She said: "I want to show them that if I can do it, so can they."

### **Coach's Perspective**

For Doug Katona it's about one thing: listening.

"You really gotta listen to your athlete," he explained. "Start to understand who they are, understand how they react in their life."



***Valenzuela pushes aside fear and anxiety by visualizing the support of her family and fans.***



*Understanding the source of an athlete's fear is the first step in overcoming pre-competition anxiety.*

Katona, of CrossFit Endurance and UnScared Inc., coaches several Games athletes, including Bryan Diaz, Jeremy Kinnick, Guido Trinidad, Becca Voigt and Heather Welsh.

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**—Doug Chapman**

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Some prefer visuals, others prefer affirmations, some need to talk, others listen to music, and there are those who just need to be comfortable.

“My athletes report to me every single day,” Katona said. “Even looking at how they’re responding to email and how they’re communicating (are) cues to pay attention to.”

Coaches must prepare their athletes for all scenarios—and that doesn’t just mean competition, but everything from sleeping in a hotel bed to eating in different places.

He advises athletes to focus on what they can control during competition.

“Things that you can’t control, you can’t control,” Katona said. “Athletes get into perception thinking of what’s good or bad.”

Coaches, meanwhile, must be the rock.

“What I tell coaches is, ‘Don’t get emotional to the emotion,’” Katona said. “As a coach, you’ve got to be calm, you’ve got to be level-headed in your thinking, you’ve got to be clear.”

A coach must understand from where the fear is coming: anxiety, stress, fear of failure?

"It's truly individual when it comes to that," he added.

Meanwhile, Doug Chapman, who coaches Shana Alverson and second-place Games finisher Julie Foucher, called his approach "holistic."

"I have regular warm-up routines before training or a workout. Part of this is it warms up the body, gets people ready to train," he explained. "At the same time, it's a comfort zone."

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Both Alverson and Foucher warm up at the Games in the same manner they do at home.

Chapman explained it as "that ritual of how you walk, how you conduct yourself."

The former wrestling coach and owner of Hyperfit USA in Ann Arbor, Mich., said he sees CrossFit athletes more than others succumb to "a defeating process."

When that happens, he first tries comic relief.

"I'll make an idiot out of myself, make them laugh," Chapman said.

But there are moments when he can be of no help.

"Sometimes they go to a place that even the best psychologist can't get them out of," Chapman said. "Human beings are strange creatures."

The mental side of coaching is the most challenging, he added.

"Every time I have a chance to buy a book about the mental side, I do," Chapman said. "There's no single method to getting to the athlete."

Yukelson would agree.

"Every person, every situation is a little different," he said.

Getting athletes to challenge their fears is key. Like Katona, Yukelson said it begins by the athlete focusing on what can be controlled.

"The big thing in controlling it is identifying it and almost slapping the fear in the face," he explained.

Athletes need to stay focused on what they're going to do and not worry about what could go wrong, Yukelson said.

Simple self-talk can help. That could be checking in with yourself every mile during a run or repeating mantras to yourself, he added.

Yukelson advised thinking of this as "ammunition to be able to fight back" or "the opportunity that I've been waiting for."

"It can be dealt with," he said. "But the person has to have the willingness to address their fears."

Coaches, Katona said, need to be better prepared to teach athletes the skills to combat mental breakdowns.

"This is the missing part of coaching right now," he said. "You gotta know what's going on elsewhere to find that balance. ... That's what we're here to do is serve athletes."



Courtesy of Andréa Maria Cecil

#### 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](#).*