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The Guy Who Almost Beat Spealler

When the final day of the South West Regional began, Matt Hathcock held the last Games spot and suddenly became the man Chris Spealler was chasing. Emily Beers explains.

By Emily Beers

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Courtesy of Matt Hathcock

CrossFit fans around the world held their breaths, incessantly refreshed their Internet browsers and anxiously awaited the fate of superstar Chris Spealler at the South West Regional in May.

Almost Beat Spealler ... (continued)

After winning the first event on Friday morning, Spealler notched 13th- and 19th-place finishes on the second and third events, which before left him outside the top three for most of the weekend. A CrossFit Games berth wasn't looking promising for the superstar from Utah as he entered the final event.

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—Shannon Simpson

Matt Hathcock, owner of CrossFit Unbroken, held the final golden ticket to the Games heading into the last two events. On Sunday morning, the 26-year-old led Spealler by three points; after Sunday morning's event, he had Spealler by five. A Games spot was Hathcock's to lose.

But as the Regional's final heat lined up, all eyes were on Spealler, the obvious sentimental favorite. The CrossFit world wanted Spealler on that podium. Period.

Well, maybe not the entire world.

Hathcock Vs. Speal

Ninety-five percent of the eyes in the building might have been on Spealler, but Shannon Simpson's eyes were 100 percent devoted to Hathcock.



Courtesy of Matt Hathcock

Hathcock's back seized up early in the last workout, making the burpee box jumps slow and painful.

Simpson, Hathcock's girlfriend, vividly remembers those fateful 17 minutes.

"The crowd was going crazy, but once the workout started, I don't remember hearing anyone because I was so focused on Matt," said Simpson, who is heading to the Games in July to compete with her Front Range CrossFit team for the fourth straight year.

As a flurry of deadlifts and muscle-ups unfolded in front of her, Simpson knew pretty quickly that something was wrong.

"I knew there was a problem early in the workout when Matt had to do singles on his deadlifts with a weight that he's been able to move well in the past," she said. "With every rep, I could see his back getting more and more tight," she continued.

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—Matt Hathcock

After five tough events, Hathcock's back was tightening up, and he suddenly felt his trip to California slipping away.

Simpson felt her boyfriend's pain as she watched.

"I think watching Matt do the burpee box jumps hurt me as much as it hurt him. I could see the pain and how he knew he needed to go faster but couldn't," she said.

"As the time ran out, we were desperately trying to calculate the scores to see who had beaten Matt. I realized that too many people had passed him in that workout for him to maintain his third-place spot. My heart nearly dropped out of my chest."

"I Was Even Rooting For Him"

Two weeks after the Regional, Hathcock had little regret.

"You know, it would have been cool to be the guy who beat Spealler," he said. "But physically, I just didn't have enough left in the tank. Spealler really dug deep ... deeper than I did.

"I didn't really think I would be able to beat him, to be honest. I knew his motor was bigger than mine. I knew I had to be faster than him. He definitely did something against all odds and showed that he can still do great things."

He paused for a moment and then added: "I mean, I was even rooting for him."



Courtesy of Matt Hathcock

Hathcock is on the Barbells for Boobs advocate team and will volunteer with the organization during the Games to help in the fight against breast cancer.

Hathcock is already thinking about next year.

Right after the Regional, he hired his girlfriend's coach, Front Range CrossFit's Skip Miller, to program and coach him heading into 2013.

"It has been hard to give up control of my own programming," Hathcock said. "But I trust Skip."

Miller's athletes dominated the Regional. Not only did a Front Range team qualify for the Games, but the top three women were also Front Range athletes: Colleen Maher, Jasmine Dever and Becky Conzelman.

Before Hathcock completely devotes himself to 2013, he has something just as important to do. He will head to the Home Depot Center this summer to volunteer with Barbells for Boobs, a nonprofit organization aimed at preventing breast cancer. And he will, of course, spend some time cheering on his girlfriend in the team competition.

Last year, Simpson's team placed second, behind CrossFit New England. This year, Simpson said their goal is to win the Affiliate Cup. That being said, Simpson admitted that just like the Regional, the Games will be bittersweet.

"I feel a huge emptiness knowing I won't get to compete with Matt in California," she said.

Disappointment aside, she said she is proud.

"He's not pouting about it," Simpson said of Hathcock. "He didn't throw a fit. He simply said the better athlete won and it's time to get back to training."

Hathcock hopes to secure a spot for next year's Games.

Until then, he said he has accepted the fact that he's the guy who almost beat Spealler.



About the Author

Emily Beers finished a master's degree in journalism at the University of Western Ontario in the spring of 2009. Upon graduation, she worked as a sportswriter at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, where she covered figure skating and short-track speed skating. Currently, she hosts WOD HOG, a not-always-PG publication of the CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness. She was the 2011 Canada West Regional Media Director and competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games with CrossFit Vancouver. She finished third in the 2012 Canada West Regional.



Shannon Simpson, Hathcock's girlfriend, at the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games.