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## Training the Mind

Andréa Maria Cecil looks at how three elite CrossFit athletes prepare their minds for competition.

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By Andréa Maria Cecil

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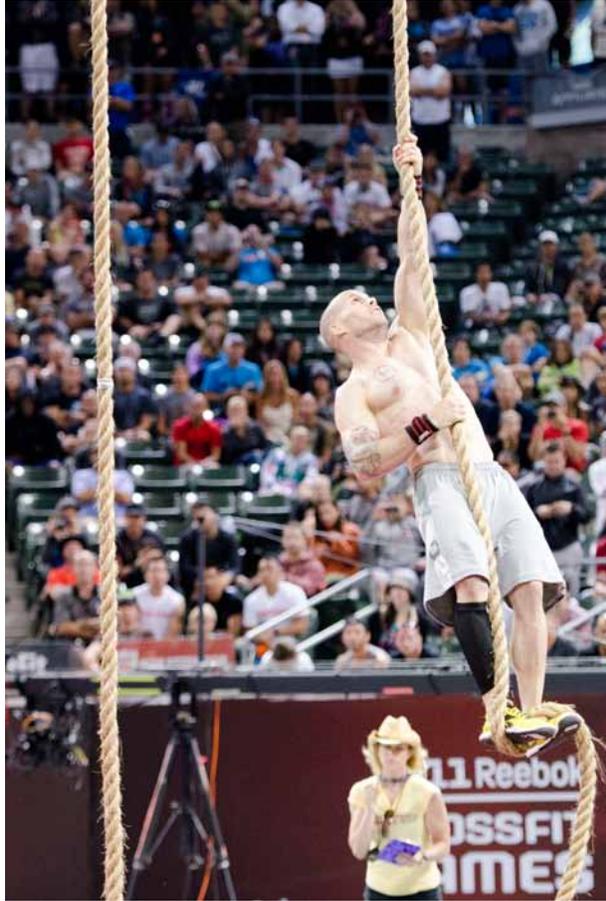
All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

Like the body, the mind must be trained so there is a plan when things go wrong.

Such is the wisdom of David Yukelson, director of sports psychology services for the Morgan Academic Support Center for Student Athletes at Penn State University, an NCAA Division I school that is part of the Big 10 Conference. Yukelson is responsible for coordinating sport-psychology services for the college's 31 teams.

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*During WODs, Games vet Chris Spealler tries to focus only on his own performance.*

"The mental side of sport is very important at any level of competition," he said.

But there are many myths, said Yukelson, past president and fellow of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology in Madison, Wis.

"People talk about 'the zone.' It's not about 'the zone.' Teaching mental skills is about compensating and adjusting when things aren't going well," he explained. "There is no cookbook. You have to understand what the person's going through to develop a specialized plan for them."

Then that person must take ownership.

"An athlete needs a coach to provide instruction, give guidance and feedback," he said, "but then it's up to the athlete to execute."

### Day 1, Event 3: Chris Spealler

The sky was dark, the stadium lights were bright, the crowd was loud, and the emcee's booming voice filled the arena.

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Rich Froning Jr., Ben Smith, Chase Daniels and Chris Spealler were in a hurried battle for a first-place finish in the final workout of the first day of the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games.

The workout:

15-foot rope climb, 5 ascents

145-lb. clean and jerk, 5 reps

15-foot rope climb, 4 ascents

165-lb. clean and jerk, 4 reps

15-foot rope climb, 3 ascents

185-lb. clean and jerk, 3 reps

15-foot rope climb, 2 ascents

205-lb. clean and jerk, 2 reps

15-foot rope climb, 1 ascent

225-lb. clean and jerk, 1 rep

Froning won the event with a time of 4:57.

Twenty-seven seconds later, Chris Spealler finished in fourth place.

Moments after the event, Froning said he could feel the other competitors figuratively breathing down his neck. He was acutely aware of where they were in the workout, he said.

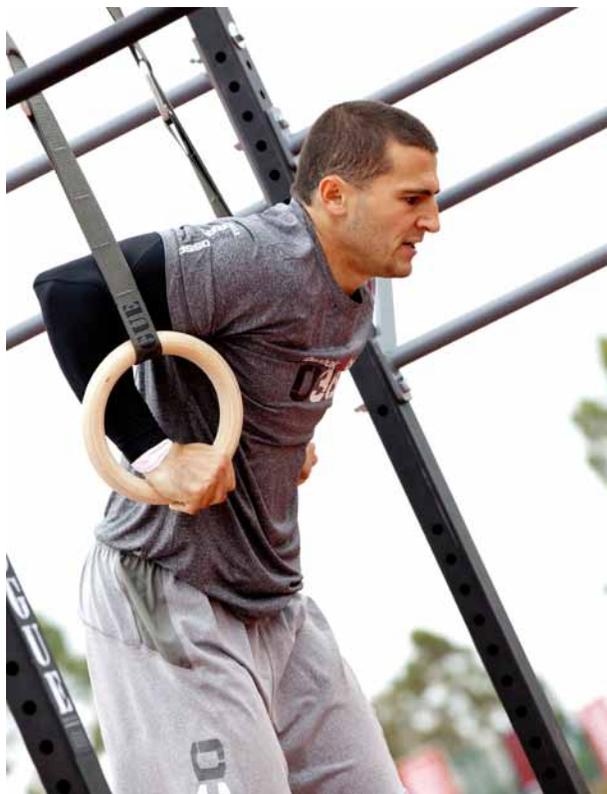
Spealler had a different perspective.

"I was just really trying to focus on my pace, on my own workout," he said minutes afterward. "I really just (was focused) on staying in my head regardless of the result because in the end it won't define me ... it won't satisfy me."

More than three weeks after the Games ended, Spealler said the mindset is one that must be learned.

"I just continue to think about focusing on what I can do and not thinking about the athletes around me," he said. "Even if I do win, it's not going to satisfy me completely. I think it's different (when you realize) that when you fail, it's not the end of the world."

The process is one Spealler called a "daily battle."



***After a poor start to the Games, Austin Malleolo was forced to rework his strategy for the rest of the competition.***

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### **Day 2, Event 4: Austin Malleolo**

At the start of the second day of the Games, Austin Malleolo was in 43<sup>rd</sup> place out of 47 competitors—a position he described as "shitty." The former hockey player had finished sixth overall in 2010.

When the day's first event began, the intensity and focus on Malleolo's face said it all: He was on a mission.

The workout:

- 5 muscle-ups
- 245-lb. deadlift, 10 reps
- 15 GHD sit-ups
- Sprint 50 yards
- 5 muscle-ups
- 245-lb. deadlift, 10 reps
- 15 GHD sit-ups
- Sprint 100 yards
- 5 muscle-ups
- 245-lb. deadlift, 10 reps
- 15 GHD sit-ups
- Sprint 150 yards
- 5 muscle-ups
- 245-lb. deadlift, 10 reps
- 15 GHD sit-ups
- Sprint 200 yards

Daniel Tyminski was gaining on Malleolo, and the emcee made sure the crowd knew it, yelling the two men's reps almost as quickly as they completed them.

In the end, Malleolo bested Tyminski by 15 seconds with a time of 7:25.

The always-colorful Tyminski said he was gunning for Malleolo.

"I guess you could say he's a target of mine," Tyminski said with a smile minutes after the workout.

Malleolo, meanwhile, was focused on trying to drown out the noise, he said.

"I try not to pace myself off others because that's not CrossFit," he said just after the event. "The only person who can beat yourself is you."

Throughout high school, Malleolo played football, hockey and lacrosse. His one downfall, he said, was trying to please others.

"It's one of those things that really can creep in and really take control," he said two weeks after the Games ended.

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The exercise of focusing on his own workout—and no one else's—during a competition is difficult but necessary to ensure "I'm not falling back in an old pattern," Malleolo said.

### **Day 3, Event 7: Camille Leblanc-Bazinet**

The sled was heavy.

For Camille Leblanc-Bazinet, it was roughly 150 lb. heavier than she was.

The first workout of the final day:

Three rounds of:

30 double-unders

95-lb. overhead squat, 10 reps

Then three rounds of:

10 handstand push-ups

40-foot sled push (sled plus 275 lb.)

The 5'2" 22-year-old had a difficult start with the sled, which was reluctant to move.

"The first time, I was totally stuck," she said minutes afterward. "Then I was like 'fuckin' no.'"

Leblanc-Bazinet ran into the sled, dropping her body into the lethargic equipment. And so it began to slide.



***Weighing only 125 lb., CLB had to find the strength and the will to move the heavy sled.***

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can only lead you to a good  
place and to a good workout!”**

**—Camille Leblanc-Bazinet**

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Her mindset during the event was to enjoy it as much as she could, she said, and to try to remember “we do this because we like to play.”

Approaching competition in such a fashion is important because “you perform the best when you feel the best,” Leblanc-Bazinet wrote in an email nearly a month after the Games. “You can focus more on your body when you are calm and happy! Starting with a good attitude can only lead you to a good place and to a good workout!”

Pre-competition, she thinks about her athletic progress, her family and her friends, she said.

“I think about how lucky I am to have potential,” said Leblanc-Bazinet, who added that she also visualizes herself doing workouts to mentally prepare for competition.

### **Coaching the Mind**

Twentieth-century folklore suggests bumblebees, according to aerodynamic calculations, shouldn't be able to fly.

This is the story Leblanc-Bazinet brings to mind when she coaches others.

“For me, the mental approach of (training) is a little bit like that. Since I don't know my limits or my real strength, I can do it!” she said.

Her boyfriend—and 2009 Games competitor—Dave Lipson told Leblanc-Bazinet the bumblebee story, which was told to him by Ben Bergeron, co-owner of CrossFit New England. The box handily won this year's Affiliate Cup.

At CFNE, there is a mantra, Bergeron said: “Think like a bumblebee, train like a racehorse.”



*At CrossFit New England, the mental game is just as important as the physical training.*



*As most CrossFitters know, focus and confidence are as essential as strength and power.*

Despite being “these really freaky animals that have these huge furry bodies and tiny little wings . . . no one ever told the bumblebee (it couldn’t fly),” he explained. “You have to have 100 percent confidence in yourself and 100 percent confidence in what you’re doing.”

As for the racehorse: “They’re gifted athletes, they know they’re elite athletes. . . . What they don’t do is they don’t second-guess the training program, they don’t second-guess the coach.”

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**“If someone is dialed in mentally, the performance just takes care of itself.”**

**—Ben Bergeron**

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If an athlete has 100 percent confidence in his or her training, programming and ability, “you have a huge advantage vs. someone who’s always doubting themselves,” Bergeron said.

There is much emphasis on mental coaching at CFNE and making sure to use positive cues—i.e., “finish strong” instead of “don’t quit”—to improve performance, he added.

“If someone is dialed in mentally, the performance just takes care of itself,” Bergeron said.

Offering the athlete an opportunity to entertain negative thoughts can lead to negative thinking, Leblanc-Bazinet said.

For his part, Malleolo said the mental, emotional and psychological aspects of CrossFit can easily be overlooked.

Malleolo went into this year’s Games having finished first at the Northeast Regional. He had high expectations for himself. So did everyone else.

"My first day of competition did not go as I planned. My physical preparation—where I was fitness-wise—was where I needed to be," he said. "The expectations and stress ... is what wore me down."

The 24-year-old ended this year's Games in 18<sup>th</sup> place.

"It's one of those things that if you're not on, if you're not ready to rock 'n' roll, you're going to end up at the back half," he explained. "I clawed my way back into it and finished in a reasonable position."

Malleolo said the mental aspect is a "huge part" of his coaching.

"It's not a competition with you and someone else—I drive that home," he said. "No one gives a crap about what you're doing, so focus on what you're doing."

Spealler said he tries to tailor his mental coaching.

"Each individual responds differently to pressure or the competition. So I think part of coaching is learning how to read people so you can give them what they need at that time," said the 32-year-old.

Yukelson echoed those statements.

"It's not a flip of the coin—ya know, 'I feel lousy today so I'm not going to perform well.' It's not a flip of a coin. It's systematic. It's not about thinking. It's about doing," he said. "The goal is to get to that frame of mind that is 'I'm ready and let's get after it.'"

He referred to this as "doing the doing."

"If they think too much, they might get into their own way because they're allowing the anxiety to get the best of them," Yukelson said.

His advice: Train, listen, observe.

"It's not genetic. It's not about being physically tough or mentally tough," he said. It's about "composure skills, so when things don't go the way you want, (you have a plan)."

Negative thoughts will happen, Bergeron said, but don't let them get the best of you.

"Obviously we're human. We're going to get freaked out," he said. "Don't stop the workout; don't let it destroy you. Realize it's a bad thought, then your next thought is positive and move on from there."



Courtesy of Andréa Maria Cecil

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#### **About the Author**

*Andréa Maria Cecil, 33, is a career journalist who is managing editor of the **Central Penn Business Journal** in Harrisburg, Pa. Andréa is a native of New Orleans who lives in York County, Pa. There, she's been doing CrossFit since 2008 at CrossFit York. Additionally, she dedicates three days a week to training in Olympic weightlifting at McKenna's Gym.*