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Intensity and Speal

CrossFit legend Chris Spealler stole the show at the South West Regional as he qualified for his sixth Games. Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

If only one word could describe the South West Regional, it would be “intense.”

Spectator numbers peaked at more than 2,000 to watch 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games competitors Patrick Burke, Matt Chan, Zach Forrest and Chris Spealler battle for the top three spots at the Douglas County Fairgrounds in Castle Rock, Colo.

The individual men's competition proved to be riveting, with Spealler definitively grabbing a podium spot on Day 3 to the roars of the crowd and the entire CrossFit community.

"Just being there is a totally different experience—the intensity of workouts and the intensity the athletes bring, just how loud and crazy and emotional the crowd is about what they're seeing," said four-time South West Regional Director Skip Miller, who also owns Front Range CrossFit in Denver.

Day 1

As the Regional kicked off, there certainly was interest in how Spealler would perform.

After last year's Games, he put himself on a bodybuilding and powerlifting program for a few months. Then he enlisted Ben Bergeron as his coach. The CrossFit New England co-owner led his affiliate team to a first-place finish at the 2011 Games.

Spealler crushed the Regional's opening workout—Diane—with a then-world-record time of 1:52. The next-fastest came 26 seconds later.

Afterward, Spealler repeated his confidence in himself, saying he felt "good."

"I'm ready. Since this stuff is known, I can prepare for it," he said. "I'm ready."

But the second workout would call for the 5-foot-5, 153-lb. athlete to clean 72 lb. above his bodyweight for 30 reps.

He finished fourth in his heat and 13th overall in the event with a time of 16:10. And he was happy about it.

Had he not been preparing in the way that he had, he wouldn't have finished the workout, he said.

"Easily," Spealler added.

And that was with a hand that was bloodied by a ripped callus.

Spealler was in second place overall.

"So far so good," said a cautious Bergeron from Massachusetts at the end of Day 1. "We'll see what happens the rest of the weekend."

The two remaining days included workouts "not for an athlete Chris' size," he added. "I'm nervous about it, for sure."

Day 2

The second day started with 100-lb. one-arm dumbbell snatches and sprints. The time cap: 10 minutes.

Matt Hathcock—5 foot 9 and 210 lb.—and Nate Beard—5 foot 10, 205 lb.—tied for first place in the workout at 3:44. Spealler finished it in 6:19 without much fanfare, placing 19th in the workout and sinking to sixth place overall.

The day's second workout—a medley of back squats, pull-ups, shoulders-to-overheads, front squats and overhead squats—was a pacer, for sure. It was one many feared and few finished. In the first three men's heats, only two athletes finished within the 22-minute time cap.

But Heat 4—the last men's grouping of the day—had all the big boys: Burke, Chan, Forrest, Hathcock and, of course, Spealler. Surely most of them would finish within the allotted time. Plus, there were pull-ups—120 of them. Speal's good at pull-ups.

Sure enough: the first 40 he did unbroken. The crowd ate it up, cheering as he knocked them out, one butterfly after another.



Supplemental bodybuilding and powerlifting training added some size to Spealler's frame, and he was prepared for the heavy loads at Regionals.



When everything depended on it, Spealler pulled through and snatched 225 lb., a 10-lb. PR.

With a pace that looked relatively calm and methodical, Spealler moved on to each exercise thereafter, neck and neck with Brandon Mericle until finally edging him out during the front squats. Still, he was trailing Chan.

When all was said and done, Chan finished at 17:27 and Spealler finished 26 seconds later at 17:53—good enough for first and second place, respectively, in the workout. The next-fastest time was Forrest at 18 minutes flat.

Spealler was now in fifth place overall.

"Honestly, I think—if I'm real honest—I'm going to have to do something pretty outstanding on the snatch tomorrow," he said during a video interview at the end of the day, "and some of the guys in the top three are going to have to perform pretty poorly in the snatch tomorrow."

Day 3

By the final day, the men's competition had people on the edge of their seats.

There was talk echoing through the stadium that Speal might not make it to the Games for the first time in the history of the event.

On the [Week 2, Day 2 CrossFit Games Update show](#), Rory McKernan joked, "Rumor has it if Chris Spealler is not at the Games, they're actually going to cancel them this year."

Pat Sherwood responded: "I'd bet you would have a band of followers that would support that decision."

That might have been an understatement.

Around the world, pens and calculators were out in attempts to figure out how many points it would take for the CrossFit icon to continue his unbroken attendance streak started in 2007 at The Ranch in Aromas, Calif. And the question kept getting asked, "Is Speal going to the Games?"

So when he approached the bar loaded at 225-lb. for the snatch-ladder event, the audience held its collective breath. It was 10 lb. above his PR.

He missed.

Say it ain't so, Speal.

He approached the bar again.

And nailed it.

The typically even-keeled Spealler let out a roar and a nearly indiscernible fist pump that was met by the audience.

"(The workout) I thought that maybe he was not going to be in a position to make it matter was the snatch," Miller said. "That was the one that actually qualified him."

Yet one event remained, and it called for deadlifts. Heavy ones: 345 lb.

The workout was brutal: 3 rounds of 7 deadlifts and 7 muscle-ups, followed by 3 rounds of 21 wall-ball shots and 21 toes-to-bars, then a 100-foot farmer carry with two 100-lb. dumbbells, 28 burpee box jumps, another 100-foot carry with the dumbbells, and, finally, 3 muscle-ups.

After the announcer yelled, "Go!" all eyes were on Spealler.

The deadlifts clearly were heavy for him, but not so much so that they crippled him. He took a few extra seconds to set up than the bigger guys but managed the lifts fairly smoothly. The muscle-ups, as expected, were no problem.

Next were wall-balls. And if you didn't know any better, you'd say they were one of his strengths.

Forrest was first off the toes-to-bars, carrying his dumbbells down to the burpee box jumps. Chan blazed out afterward. Spealler reached the box once Chan was several reps in.

Forrest finished first with a time of 14:57.

Chan finished his second farmer carry and made it back to the rings, performing one muscle-up and taking a rest. Then another. Suddenly Chan jerked his head toward his left shoulder. Spealler had made his way back, dropped the dumbbells, immediately got on the rings and busted out 3 muscle-ups unbroken. The two men ended up **tying at second in the workout** with a time of 15:24.

The crowd erupted.

"Unofficial: #spealler third!!!!," was the tweet read around the globe from the official South West Regional account, satisfying the CrossFitters who had been incessantly hitting refresh for the tense minutes the event was being contested.

Officially, Spealler is going to the Games. All is right with the world.



Chris Spealler: unstoppable and unforgettable.

"That was impressive," Miller said. "You can't say more than what they're saying about Spealler right now. He did the right thing of putting himself in the right position in the right time. It was impressive."

Perhaps "intense" was wrong.

If only one word could describe the South West Regional, it probably should be "Speal."



Courtesy of Andréa Maria Cecil

About the Author:

*Andréa Maria Cecil is the North East Regional Media Director for the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games. She spent nearly 13 years as a professional journalist, most recently as managing editor of the **Central Penn Business Journal** in Harrisburg, Pa. The 33-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**. Additionally, she dedicates three days a week to training in Olympic weightlifting at **McKenna's Gym**.*