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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## A Legend Returns

After more than seven years of inspiring generations of CrossFitters, Nasty Girl Annie Sakamoto competes as an individual in the CrossFit Games. Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

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By Andréa Maria Cecil

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All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

Fear is what gripped her.

For four years, it kept her from individual competition at the CrossFit Games.

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"I was scared," Annie Sakamoto admitted after the final workout of the three-day event held July 29-31 at the Home Depot Center in Carson, Calif.

Scared, that is, until this year. That's when she stepped into the spotlight with countless fans behind her.

A CrossFit icon, the always-smiling Sakamoto finished in ninth at the Games. There, the 35-year-old mother of two found herself on several occasions rep for rep, stride for stride or pull for pull with the likes of 2010 Games winner Kristan Clever, among others.

"It was, outside of childbirth, the best experience I've ever had," Sakamoto said four days after the Games ended.

But Games competition wasn't new to her. In 2009, the co-owner of CrossFit Santa Cruz Central participated in the Affiliate Cup held at The Ranch in Aromas, Calif. Days after this year's Games, Sakamoto said she realized being scared of competing as an individual "was just silly."



***Always fit, Sakamoto needed only about two months of specific training to prepare her for the Games.***

"I felt like I would have to measure myself up against a lot of these phenomenal athletes," she said. "Really, you're not measuring yourself up against anybody but yourself. Everyone's trying to do their own best and wants each other do their own best."

### **Seven Weeks of Training**

Sakamoto had no intention of going to the Games. That's mostly because she had no intention of going to regionals. And that's mostly because she wavered on whether she'd participate in the Open.

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**"It was, outside of childbirth,  
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**—Annie Sakamoto on the  
2011 Reebok CrossFit Games**

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Once she qualified through the Open, "she wasn't even really set on going to regionals," said Gary Hirthler, Sakamoto's coach for the NorCal Regional and the Games. "With a little bit of convincing, she went to regionals."

Hirthler, a Level 1 CrossFit trainer with a bachelor of science in exercise and movement science from San Francisco State University, had Sakamoto doing two workouts a day before the NorCal Regional, held June 3-5 at the Santa Clara County Fairgrounds. With her third-place finish there—she finished behind Elyse Umeda and Jenny LaBaw after a tiebreaker with Chyna Cho—Sakamoto asked him to be her Games coach.

That meant all Sakamoto's Games preparation would come in seven weeks. Less, if you ask Hirthler.

"It was more like five weeks of training and a two-week taper before," he said.

Although she trains CrossFit all year, Sakamoto said she wasn't training the same volume or intensity characteristic of the Games.

"I wasn't really working out really hard," she said.



*Throughout the contest, other athletes watched and cheered for the Original Nasty Girl.*

In the end, Sakamoto said she was pleased with her performance at the Games.

"I have a grade-A coach," she said after the final workout of the competition. "He obviously did well with the time he was given."

Hirthler, meanwhile, said he felt lucky to be able to train Sakamoto.

"There isn't a better person to train, physically. It's really not rocket science with her. ... The way she responds (to training). She moves so well," said the 26-year-old, who started CrossFitting in 2005. "It's 100 percent enjoyment, really. It's a total dream job."

### **"I Want to Be You When I Grow Up"**

For Games veteran and 2009 bronze medalist Carey Kepler, Sakamoto represents the reason she started CrossFitting in 2005.

"My first introduction to CrossFit was the Nasty Girls video," said the co-owner of CrossFit Central in Austin, Texas. "And the only reason I said 'this could be a good thing' was because of that video."

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**"To be just able to compete  
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**—Carey Kepler  
on Annie Sakamoto**

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"To be just able to compete with her this year ... that was like the best thing ever," continued the 36-year-old mom who finished in 28<sup>th</sup> place at the 2011 Games. "That was awesome."

Third-place finisher Becca Voigt echoed Kepler's sentiments.

"It was an honor to be competing next to her," she said. "I thought it was really cool to see someone who pioneered this sport competing and saying, 'Look, we were the originals, we still have it in us.' I don't know how to put it into words. It was very, very impressive."

It was Voigt's first time meeting Sakamoto, whom she first heard of shortly after starting CrossFit in 2007. Within five minutes, Voigt said all her expectations were met.

"She was the most welcoming, the most non-judgmental person that I've ever met. I'm very skeptical about people when it comes to first meeting them," said the coach at Valley CrossFit in Van Nuys, Calif. "It's truly genuine."

Likewise, it was no surprise Sakamoto was named the 2011 Spirit of the Games Award winner.

"If you've ever been around Annie, she just puts a smile on your face and is always fun to be around," Hirthler said. "I feel like anyone who knows Annie or has hung out with her understands what she's about—everything is about having fun."

Multiple times during the weekend, Sakamoto was heard describing grueling workouts as "epic," "awesome" and "fun." In the first event, a tough workout that involved an ocean swim then two soft-sand runs on either side of a combination of 350 push-ups, pull-ups and squats, Sakamoto finished third, crossing the finish line with a grin on her face.

Kepler—herself known for frequent smiles, exuberant reactions and comical retorts—described Sakamoto as being all about laughter, a positive attitude, heart and desire.

"It's contagious," said Kepler, who met Sakamoto several years ago at a CrossFit seminar. "There's nothing better than that disease going around."

The amount of fans cheering for Sakamoto floored Hirthler.

"Just walking around, the number of people who came up to her, who said she inspired them to do CrossFit. 'I want to be you when I grow up.' I heard that so many times," he said.

Although a mere 5 feet tall and 116 lb., Sakamoto has a presence that is difficult to ignore.



*Always, always smiling.*

"She's always smiling," Hirthler said. "It's hard not to root for her."

Kepler described Sakamoto as "phenomenal."

"It's who she is and who she always will be," she said. "I learned probably more from her over the weekend than I did from any athlete there. It's all about attitude."

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**"If you've ever been around Annie, she just puts a smile on your face and is always fun to be around."**

**—Gary Hirthler**

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*Muscle-ups, of course, aren't a problem for Sakamoto.*

### How It Started

Unlike many competitive CrossFitters today, Sakamoto has a lackluster pre-CrossFit athletic background, she said.

"I played a ton of sports in high school, but I was just completely mediocre at all of them—soccer, water polo, one year of swimming, one year of diving. Barely mediocre," she said.

Then, in the spring of 2004, when Sakamoto was teaching a cardio-kickboxing class, longtime friend Eva Twardokens suggested she do a CrossFit workout with CrossFit founder and CEO Greg Glassman at the original CrossFit HQ box in Santa Cruz, Calif.

"She was training with Greg and she said, 'Why don't you come in and do a little workout?' and I did," Sakamoto recounted.

After a couple of workouts, she kept going back. Eventually, she would become part of one of the most well-known videos from the CrossFit main site: Nasty Girls.

Nasty Girls: [.mov](#) [.wmv](#)

The video shows Sakamoto, Twardokens and Nicole Carroll doing the Nasty Girls workout: 3 rounds for time of 50 squats, 7 muscle-ups and 10 hang power cleans at 95 lb.

In the now-famous video, Sakamoto finished the workout first with a time of about 9:48. Carroll, who dissolved into tears at the end of the video after difficulty with the final round of muscle-ups and cleans, is now CrossFit co-director of training. She bestowed the Spirit of the Games Award on Sakamoto on the final day of the competition, telling the crowd the recognition was going to someone who has inspired generations of CrossFitters.

For Sakamoto, being regarded in such a fashion is "pretty humbling."

"A lot of it, I think, was I was at the right place at the right time," she said. "I feel really fortunate and really lucky and really humbled."



*Courtesy of Andréa Maria Cecil*

### 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.