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## Future Unknown

Chris Spealler has yet to decide if he will try to qualify for next year's CrossFit Games. Time, he said, is what's holding him back. His wife, meanwhile, wants him to compete again. Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

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By Andréa Maria Cecil

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All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

About a week after the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games ended, Sarah Spealler texted her husband's coach, Ben Bergeron. "Let's make a machine! I'll feed him you train him! Yay!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"



***The run at Camp Pendleton turned into a painful shuffle when Spealler's calves, quads and hip flexors cramped terribly.***

Bergeron, co-owner and head coach at CrossFit New England, replied 15 minutes later: "This is one of the best text(s) I have ever received. We'll tag team him and he won't even know what happened."

Sarah's husband, the iconic Chris Spealler, had said 2012 would be his last CrossFit Games.

But when the couple left California to go home to Utah, Sarah didn't much like the idea.

"I think we both left the Games this year feeling like there was no closure," she explained. "I don't think he's done. He's not done."

Shortly before Sarah texted Bergeron, Spealler had made contact with his coach, too. The two men decided that for the next three months he would follow a similar weight-gain program to the one he adopted in the year after the 2011 Games.

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**—Chris Spealler**

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"Ben and I talked and we said if I were going to compete again next year (what I would do) is try to put another 10 lb. on me," Spealler said. "Regardless of whether I was going to do it or not, this is what I would have to do anyway."

After those 90 days, he'll make a decision. Maybe.

"There's been days when I'm like, 'I'm in.' And there's days when I'm like, 'I don't know,'" Spealler said.

"If I do step away, no doubt I will miss it," he said. "When you step away, your work capacity doesn't turn off. It's still there. I think there's a lot of mixed emotions in my head right now. I want to give it a lot of thought."

### **Toughness Is Speal**

As if there weren't enough Spealler fans already, his inspirational performance in May at the South West Regional created many more. For weeks, it seemed like every tweet and Facebook post was about him: the underdog who proved that with enough heart, size doesn't matter. The 5-foot-5, 151-lb. athlete entered the Games—his sixth—with tremendous community support.

"Speal," as CrossFitters know him, had a strong start to the swim-bike-run event that opened this year's four-day competition. Although he lost both his wedding ring and his goggles before the swim even began, halfway through the nearly 7-mile run, he was in third place. Then something happened—something that never has happened before: Spealler cramped so badly that his run turned into a walk, then to a shuffle. The seizing in his calves, quads and hip flexors was so intense it left bruises.



He watched helplessly as competitors blew past him.

And so the man who said he was going to this year's Games not to have fun but to win went from third to third-to-last.

"I was really looking forward to a triathlon. I thought it would be great," Spealler said more than two weeks after the Games ended. "A lot of things happened that were out of my control."

Bergeron said the performance made him "incredibly proud."

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**—Ben Bergeron**

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It perfectly aligned with one of his favorite sayings: "Toughness is the ability to perform at the upper limits of your talent and skill regardless of the competitive circumstance."

That, Bergeron said, is what Spealler exemplified.

"Things happened that he had to battle through," he explained.

In a blog post published July 31, Bergeron commended Spealler, who has competed in every edition of the CrossFit Games.

"The fact that he was able to finish the final 5K, when every step and every minute was excruciatingly painful, is a (testament) to his focus and determination," Bergeron wrote. "Battling all odds, Chris was able to make it all the way to Sunday's event and give the crowd a show as he hung with the bigger athletes in the heavy chipper (WOD) and the double banger."

Spealler finished this year's Games in 22nd place.

### **Time and Commitment**

When asked what was holding him back from quickly making a decision about next year's Games, Spealler replied with one word: time.

"I put more time and more energy into this year than I ever have," he explained.



***Spealler put on 11 lb. in the last year, which helped him hold his own in the heavier events at the Games.***

Since last year's Games, Spealler put on as much as 11 lb. on a basic bodybuilding routine designed by Chris Mason, owner of AtLarge Nutrition and a member of Louie Simmons' team for CrossFit Powerlifting seminars.

"He's as committed as anyone I've ever worked with," Mason said. "He's willing to do what he needs to do to get where he needs to get."

When he introduced the weight-gain routine, Mason said he didn't think Spealler would go for it. He was wrong.

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"When I gave him the program, he didn't blink an eye. I honestly thought he was going to say, 'I can't do that,'" Mason said. "That's impressive. It shows that he's open-minded about new concepts even though he's an advanced athlete in his field, and that's unusual."



***Spealler's heart and determination have made him one of the most loved and admired CrossFit athletes in the world.***

Afterward, Spealler enlisted Bergeron as his coach and tackled one of his biggest weaknesses: heavy loads at high reps. Spealler improved, Bergeron said, but there's still work to be done.

"It's gotten better, but we will continue to focus on it," he said. "It's never enough."

After three months of a weight-gain routine, Spealler will return to Bergeron's prescription this year as well.

"Last year's program was appropriate," Bergeron said.

But more training means less time with family.

In addition to a wife, 33-year-old Spealler has two young children, an affiliate, a job on CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff that takes him out of town every weekend, and a new blog.

"There's just so much on my plate right now," he said. "It's a huge commitment."

Putting in a 60-plus-hour work week and being a top-level CrossFit athlete make Spealler special, Mason said.

"The fact that he's able to do what he does (with) a workload that most people couldn't maintain, period, to me is just super impressive," he explained. "Plus he's a good role model. He's not a putz."

If he's going to try to qualify for the 2013 Games, Spealler said he wants to be sure he's all-in.

"If I do it, I want to make sure my head and my heart are in it 100 percent," he said.

Since the Utah athlete started CrossFit in the fall of 2006, the sport has been about competition for him.

"It is a big part of my life—the competition side," Spealler said.

His Games training, Sarah noted, creates more work for both of them.

"Time with him is very chopped up during the week," she said.

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**—Sarah Spealler**

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Nonetheless, Sarah might be the biggest proponent of her husband going to the Games again.

"He's just talented. And he can hang with any guy out there. It's just a matter of what comes out of the hopper," she said. "Unless he's completely anciently old and he's getting 100th place or something, then maybe it's like, 'Maybe we should put your shoes up in the closet.'"

Sarah added: "I know, I know he loves it."

With no competitive team in the works at Spealler's box, CrossFit Park City, he would have to compete as an individual once more. That, Sarah said, has elicited some

"what-ifs?" What if he doesn't qualify for the Games? What if he finishes outside the top 10? What would the community think? He knows he has to be OK with whatever the outcome might be.

Spealler's chances of qualifying would be just as good as they were at this year's Regional, Bergeron said.

"(The odds) were pretty much stacked against him," he said of the Regional competition characterized by heavy weights. "I think he has as good a chance, if not better. ... It's a long shot for everybody."

With the appropriate weight gain and the appropriate training, Mason said, Spealler could climb the leaderboard at the Games.

"If I was the only person advising him, I'd tell him, 'Get up to 165,'" he said. "He knows, obviously, how to train for CrossFit-style WODs. But I think something different could be done to maintain the size and strength he built and still compete in the CrossFit realm."

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**"I felt like I had to win the Games to (get) that stamp of approval from the community."**

**—Chris Spealler**

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***Spealler proved that heart and determination trump size.***

Successful Games competitors need to be of a certain size now to "really, really excel," he said, specifically naming second-place finisher Matt Chan and repeat champ Rich Froning Jr. Chan is 5 foot 10 and 208 lb., while Froning is 5 foot 10 and 195 lb., according to their Games-site profile pages.

If Spealler went from his current 153 lb. to 165 lb. "and got strength commensurate with his weight gain and came in with the same conditioning he's always had," it would be no surprise to see him in the top five, Mason said.

For her part, Sarah said she doesn't know what her husband would do without the Games.

"He said he would go to smaller competitions and still work out. I said, 'Well if you're still going to smaller competitions and still working out, then why not?'"



## Stamp of Approval

Each time Spealler stepped onto the competition floor at this year's Games, the crowd roared. Each time the emcee said his name, it roared again. And each time he struggled with a heavy implement and notched another rep, it roared once more.

Spealler took note.

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**—Chris Spealler**

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"I just appreciate it so much," he said. "That's a huge part of what keeps me calm and keeps me focused."

But while there's evidence that his status among CrossFitters is etched in stone, Spealler himself has his doubts.

"I felt like I had to win the Games to (get) that stamp of approval from the community," he said. "It's so awesome that they're still supportive. It takes pressure off me and I just need to do what I need to do."

Every athlete has his worries. Disappointing the CrossFit community is Spealler's, his wife said.

Sarah stresses to him that it wouldn't matter if he placed first or 50th.

"They don't love you any less," she tells him.



***No matter where he sits on the leaderboard, the crowd loves Spealler.***

Bergeron said he's advised Spealler to try for the 2013 Games if his heart is in it.

"The only thing I've said is that 'If you go back, make sure it's for the right reasons,'" he recounted. "And the right reasons are not to prove something. Your legacy has been cemented."

If Spealler does compete at next year's Games, "I think it's awesome," Bergeron said. "I'm so excited to be his coach again."

Now a friend, he said he supports Spealler no matter his decision.

"He doesn't need to do anything to make me feel good about anything," Bergeron added.

For Spealler, it's important the community knows how much its support over the years has meant to him.

"I don't know if it is going to be my last year or not, but I feel like I didn't get a chance to say goodbye. If 2012 is the last year that I compete in the Games, (I want) the community (to) know that their support is, like, massive. It's just huge how much they've given me," he said.

"I can't put into words how much I wish I could thank them in some other way than just saying thank you. It definitely hasn't gone unnoticed."

On the Games website, Spealler's profile page is subtly different than many of the other athletes. Instead of simply choosing suggested answers, he adds a bit of color that gives insight into his character.

In describing his nutrition, he wrote, "Don't forget the mint shake once a week from Cold Stone... totally necessary."

As for his workout schedule: "Gotta have recovery if you want to have intensity. Gotta have intensity if you want to see results."

But perhaps the most defining sentence comes in his eight-word bio: "Time to chase down the big boys again."



Courtesy of Andréa Maria Cecil

### About the Author

*Andréa Maria Cecil* was the North East Regional Media Director for the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games. She has been a freelance writer and editor for the **CrossFit Journal** since 2010 and also writes for the CrossFit Games site. Cecil 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 three days a week to training the Olympic lifts herself at [McKenna's Gym](#).