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Chris Spealler: The Fire Inside

The legendary CrossFitter embarks on qualifying for his sixth Games by turning his training and nutrition upside down. Russell Greene reports.

By Russell Greene

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Throughout his athletic career, Chris Spealler has been known for pushing his smaller frame to compete with larger athletes.

It began long before he found CrossFit.

After wrestling for four years in high school, he earned a scholarship to wrestle at Lock Haven University. There, he was known for out-powering 197-lb. Division 1 wrestlers on the Airdyne, a stationary bicycle pedaled with both legs and arms.

Spealler is such a skilled athlete it's strange to call anything a struggle for him. His five-time CrossFit Games career, however, has been defined by the same struggle he encountered as a wrestler: capitalizing on his speed and stamina while forcing his body to exert ever-larger amounts of force seemingly through strength of will alone.

Each year he has excelled at events testing skill, speed and endurance. On the other hand, events with heavy weight have always held him back in the rankings. It has been a constant tension in his performance. Spealler has reached to new limits by lifting heavier loads each year, yet he has never seemed quite strong enough to win.

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This year, however, “Speal” is trying something different.

Fed up with simply getting stronger while staying relatively the same size, Spealler has embarked on a radical weight-gain plan.

Wrestling at Lock Haven

A conversation with Spealler’s college wrestling coach shows how little Spealler has changed in a decade. The descriptors “mental toughness,” “engine” and “strong for his size” keep popping up.

Whenever the coach wanted to make a point about how a wrestler should train or otherwise act, Spealler was the “yardstick” for others to follow.

Lock Haven is a Division II school so focused on wrestling that it competed at the Division I level solely in that sport. Rocky Bonomo coached Spealler for five years at the Pennsylvania school—one year as an assistant coach and the rest as head coach.

Whenever the coach wanted to make a point about how a wrestler should train or otherwise act, Spealler was the “yardstick” for others to follow, Bonomo said. At the end-of-year team banquets, guys would often say they did as much as they could to improve but admitted they still only did a quarter of the work Spealler did.

Bonomo recalled a drill he had wrestlers do on the Airdyne: operate at max output for as long as possible. Spealler produced higher output for longer than wrestlers who outweighed him by 75 lb., Bonomo said.

Spealler’s conditioning was so good that “if a wrestling match didn’t have a time limit, he would have won every match,” Bonomo added.

But Spealler didn’t have every advantage. While many of his competitors had been wrestling since elementary school, he started much later—in high school.



Spealler wrestling in college—more hair, same intensity.

He “didn’t have the seasoning that some of the other guys did,” Bonomo said.

When he wrestled, Spealler often counted on his superior fitness and athleticism to carry him against more experienced wrestlers.

Although he had a bigger engine than most wrestlers, Spealler sometimes got himself into trouble with over-aggression, Bonomo said.

“If a wrestling match didn’t have a time limit, he would have won every match.”

—Rocky Bonomo

He would move so powerfully that he got “out of position.” In wrestling, a very skill-driven sport, one mistake caused by over-enthusiasm can turn a match. Another problem was that Spealler’s motivation at times got the best of him, Bonomo said. He would train with “reckless abandon” every day, not affording himself the opportunity to recover, the coach remembered. Every match, he expected not only to win but to outwork his opponent.

Courtesy of Chris Spealler



Instead of wrestling in the lowest weight class possible, Spealler jumped up one or two weight classes and fought heavier athletes.

To understand the fire that burns within Spealler, it helps to understand how he got started wrestling at Lock Haven. In his first year as an eligible wrestler, the head coach at the time had invested a lot of time and resources in three-time state champion Trap McCormick. The only problem was McCormick was in the same weight class as Spealler.

When two wrestlers on a team are competing to wrestle at the same weight class, the normal protocol is for them to have a wrestle-off. The winner represents the team at that weight class.

Spealler beat McCormick, but the head coach chose to start McCormick instead. It was a “super tough” experience, Spealler said.

Within two weeks of starting CrossFit, Spealler finished 30 muscle-ups with a time of 8:50.

For the next three years, Spealler did something unusual.

He bumped up a weight class to wrestle at 133 lb. and even sometimes at 141 lb. when the team’s normal 141-pounder was unable to make weight. Normally, wrestlers try to make as low a weight class as possible, but just as with the Airdyne, Spealler was a strong enough wrestler to compete with heavier athletes.

During his senior year, Spealler finished in the top 20 nationwide and reached the second round of the 2002 Division 1 National Championships. He came just two rounds away from his goal of becoming an all-American. Even though he fell short, he finished his season “with absolutely no regrets,” he said.

When he graduated later that year, Spealler had the opportunity to pursue wrestling at the next level. But after putting his body through stress for five years, he chose to take time off from the intense dedication to which he had grown accustomed.

Post-College Uncertainty, Then CrossFit

Spealler graduated with a bachelor’s degree in commercial recreation and moved to Park City, Utah. There, he started dating Sarah, his future wife.

At the time, Sarah was getting her master’s in elementary education in addition to “juggling a few jobs,” she said. She had already found her passion—children—but Spealler didn’t seem to know his purpose yet. For a while, “he didn’t know what he wanted to do with his life,” Sarah said.

To make ends meet, Sarah said Spealler worked at a shop “tuning bikes in the summer and skis in the winter” and coached wrestling at Park City High School. A long-term plan, however, proved elusive.

For a while, he considered being a gym teacher, but the amount of education required seemed like it would take too long. He even took a licensing exam to sell health insurance but didn’t like the idea of working behind a desk all day.

The couple was active. Sarah was an ultra-marathon runner; Chris wasn’t into running but would still accompany her on runs.

In October 2006, their friend Eric Bova, a Marine, told them about CrossFit.

From the beginning, it was clear Spealler had something special. Getting a muscle-up is a milestone for most beginner and intermediate CrossFitters. Within two weeks of starting CrossFit, Spealler finished **30 muscle-ups with a time of 8:50**. Even more impressive, he didn’t have rings, so he improvised by taking cable cross-over straps from a free motion machine and hanging them from a pull-up bar.

Two weeks later, he completed Linda as RX'd in 11:49—faster than Josh Everett and James FitzGerald, two of CrossFit's best at the time. When he hit Barbara the next week, he went under 2 minutes on 4 out of 5 rounds while cutting the rest periods from 3 minutes to 2:30.

Still, Spealler had his weaknesses.

Spealler already had made a name for himself on the CrossFit main site. But in Aromas, Calif., only live competition performances would count.

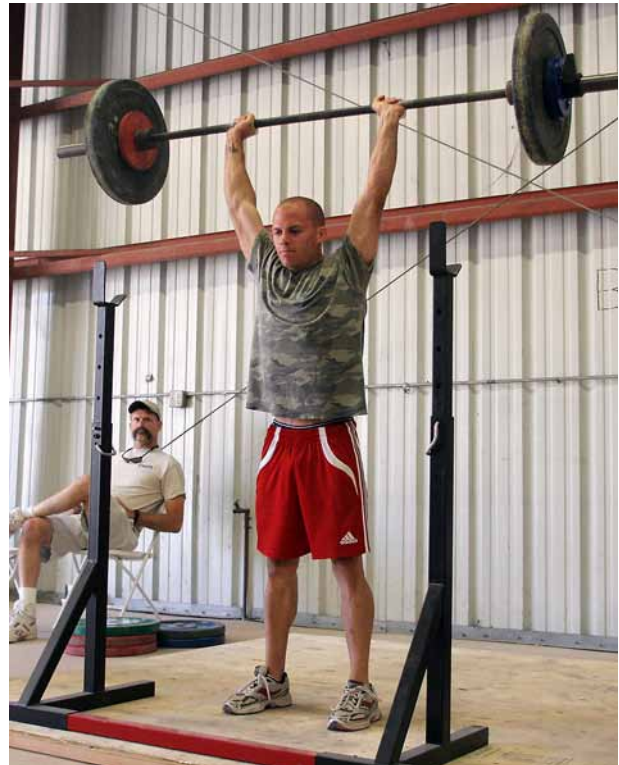
At 129 lb., he couldn't throw weight around the way heavier CrossFitters did. He only put up a 215-lb. front squat for 3 reps. When Diane showed up, he wasn't sure he could handle the prescribed 21-15-9 deadlift reps at 225 lb. with a max only around 300 lb. Still, with consistent CrossFitting, his powerlifting and Olympic-lifting numbers inched up.

In February 2007, the first CrossFit Games were announced for June 30-July 1. Spealler had already made a name for himself on the CrossFit main site. But in Aromas, Calif., only live competition performances would count.

Five Years of the Games

After nine months of CrossFit, Spealler headed to California to compete in the inaugural competition. His wife, who had not yet bought into CrossFit, was visiting family back east the same weekend. She was new to CrossFit then and said she "didn't really get it yet." It was the only Games she would ever miss.

The event kicked off with a 3-kilometer trail run. Beginning and ending with a flat straightaway section on a road, the middle portion of the run included hills so steep elite athletes like Everett crawled to the top. Seemingly unaffected by the incline, Spealler edged out FitzGerald in the final sprint and won by 2 seconds.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Spealler worked hard to increase his powerlifting and Olympic-lifting numbers when he started CrossFit, even though he only weighed 129 lb.

CrossFit founder Greg Glassman selected the second event out of a hopper:

1000-meter row

5 rounds of:

25 pull-ups

7 jerks (135 lb.)

For Spealler, that meant lifting 6 lb. more than his body weight over his head 35 times. He finished third with a time of 13:52.

On Day 2, Spealler was tied for first with FitzGerald and Brett Marshall. The day's sole event was a CrossFit Total: three attempts each for maximum weight on the back squat, shoulder press and deadlift.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Time and again, Spealler dominated the endurance and body-weight events and struggled when things got heavy.

Spealler put up a combined 756.8 lb., earning him 22nd place for that event and fourth place overall. Another 110 lb. would have beat Josh Everett and put him in third place at the Games. To win, Spealler would have needed 150 lb. across the three lifts.

In 2009, Spealler again won the long run event but finished 71st on the deadlift ladder with a 375-lb. pull. Despite solid finishes in other events, he finished in a comparatively mediocre 25th place overall and didn't qualify to compete on the second day. To date, 2009 was his worst Games finish.

“He felt as though he let everyone down.”

—Sarah Spealler

The following weeks were tough on the Spealler family. The couple was “bummed, frustrated and angry,” Sarah said.

For a while, Spealler thought about “not competing anymore and just continuing to CrossFit,” she said.

Eventually, he got back to training for the Games.

The year set the stage for his future Games performances. In 2008, Spealler finished the first three events nearly a minute faster than any other competitor only to fall to 10th after the final event: 30 squat clean and jerks for time (155 lb.). To go from first to 10th in just seven minutes was hard for Spealler to handle.

In February 2010, Sarah gave birth to Roark, their first child. While others worried that having a baby would hurt Spealler's training, his wife gave his workouts a priority. Sarah would get up at night to take care of the baby so her husband could sleep, and she didn't care if she had to stay at home all day or miss a workout so he could find time to train.

Sarah's sacrifices paid off in 2010.

“He felt as though he let everyone down,” Sarah said.

That year, Spealler's worst event finish again came in a heavy event: 26th place in the max-overhead event. Nonetheless, that respectable showing in a heavy event, combined with superior finishes in most of the other events, yielded his best finish ever: third overall. He was also given the Spirit of the Games Award.

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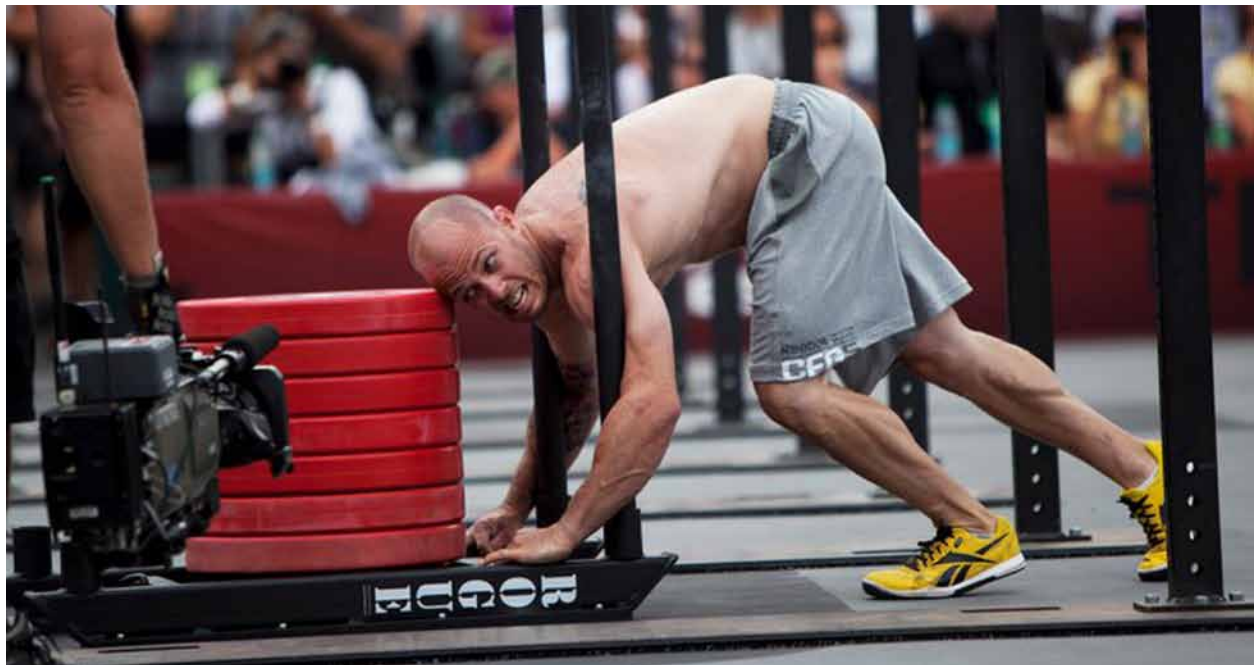
This year, he struggled with the sets of 7 front squats at 225 lb. in the Killer Kage event. Spealler moved through the monkey bars swiftly, but as soon as he reached the heavy bar, he fell behind. His 7:57 time landed him in 24th on the event—his worst finish besides the first skills event where a poor softball throw left him in 26th place.

The next event looked even more challenging. Immediately after a couplet of 135-lb. overhead squats and double-unders, competitors had to complete 3 rounds of 10 handstand push-ups and a 40-foot sled push (385 lb. plus sled).

When Spealler first tried to push the sled, it didn't budge. He tried again almost immediately, forcing it to move. With a very high hand placement, though, his first steps were slow and labored. Jason Khalipa blew past him, making the sled look light. After a slow start, Spealler improvised, driving his head and shoulders into the lower part of the sled.

The sled moved faster; Spealler completed the first push. He went back to the wall for a quick set of 10 handstand push-ups and was soon back for the second sled push. He used his new technique for the second and third pushes, moving faster as the workout continued. His first sled push took 50 seconds; his second took 27. Spealler took fifth place on the workout with a time of 6 minutes flat, an impressive showing in the heaviest event.

Spealler finished the 2011 Games in 11th place, a decent performance, but not what he was hoping for. He went home to prepare for his sixth Games. This time, however, he would try something entirely new.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

In the 2011 Games, Spealler initially struggled to push the weighted sled but quickly figured out a technique that gave him a fifth-place finish in the Dog-Sled event.

Committing to Weight Gain

Spealler's consistent performance across five Games belies the utter transformation his body went through between 2007 and 2011.

At the 2007 Games, he weighed 129 lb. with a 320-lb. deadlift, 55 consecutive pull-ups, a 195-lb. clean and a 155-lb. snatch. At the 2011 Games, he weighed in at 145 lb. with a 420-lb. deadlift, 106 consecutive pull-ups, a 265-lb. clean and a 210-lb. snatch.

Still, 2007's CrossFit Total, 2008's heavy Grace, 2009's deadlift ladder and 2011's heavy front squats all weighed heavily on him. He looked at "some of the other athletes at the Games that are similar to my size and doing well."

At 5 feet 5 inches, for example, Josh Bridges is the same height as Spealler but was 15 lb. heavier at this year's Games. The extra pounds came in handy on the Killer Kage's front squats; Bridges blasted through them much faster than Spealler, finishing with a time of 6:36 for a fourth-place finish in the workout. Bridges finished second overall at the Games.

Besides his heavier competition, Spealler also said he found himself "bumping into some walls and having a hard time making gains with lifts and numbers at that weight."

"He is always eating something."

—Miranda Oldroyd

To keep getting stronger at that body weight, he would have had to "focus on strength only," he said. Thus, to get stronger while improving his conditioning, Spealler decided it was time to make a concerted effort to gain weight.

The plan he devised involves dramatic changes to his training and nutrition. Whereas before this year's Games he ate fairly instinctively and didn't worry too much about tracking quantities, now he is making "a big effort to keep track of my calories and eat, eat, eat," he said.

He's now eating 4,700 calories a day. Miranda Oldroyd, his co-worker on the Level 1 Seminar circuit, reports that while Spealler isn't known for eating ridiculous quantities in one meal, "he is always eating something."

Besides the food, Spealler has cut his regular CrossFit training to two days per week and added four days a week of powerlifting and bodybuilding. And when he said "bodybuilding," he didn't mean just CrossFit staples like front squats and deadlifts but "meathead" exercises like "Tate presses, bicep curls, lateral raises and hammie curls with a band," he said. He does around 2 sets of 10-20 reps per movement, except for what he called "the miserable giant set." It's a combination of stiff-legged deadlifts, hamstring curls and back squats "all to failure in the 10-20-rep range with no rest between sets," he said.

It's not the type of training normally seen with Games athletes or regular CrossFitters. But the program is so far achieving Spealler's goals. He gained 7 lb. by Oct. 5 for a total of 152 lb. His back squat is "increasing steadily with sets of 3," as has his deadlift for 5-10 reps, he said.

His goal: a lean 155 lb.

At that point, Spealler said he'll "start to focus more on couplets and triplets in CrossFit again."

He'll also start focusing on the Olympic lifts more.

Despite the changes, one thing has remained constant for Spealler since 2007.

"I want to make it back to the Games this year," he said. "I want to win."



Liabeth Darsh

About the Author

Russell Greene writes about the CrossFit Games for CrossFit Media.