
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

“He Will Find a Way”

Chris Spealler continues his preparation: He’s going to the Reebok CrossFit Games to win. Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

June 2012



All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

There’s one reason Chris Spealler is going to this year’s CrossFit Games.

“Honestly, I’m going to win,” he said. “I’m not going to have fun.”

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After managing a third-place finish at the South West Regional with a performance nothing short of remarkable, the iconic CrossFitter is forging ahead in his preparation for his sixth consecutive Games July 13-15 in Carson, Calif.

“But for me to see that stuff and still compete with the guys that I did, if anything, it boosts my confidence.”

—Chris Spealler

The Regional workouts were “definitely not programming that favors me (and) probably the furthest thing from what I hope to see come up,” Spealler said.

“But for me to see that stuff and still compete with the guys that I did,” he adds, “if anything, it boosts my confidence.”

On the final day of the Regional, Ben Bergeron, Spealler’s coach and the co-owner CrossFit New England, was in Massachusetts reading texts arriving by the second from James Hobart. The CFNE affiliate team member was at the event, giving Bergeron a play-by-play on Spealler.

Bergeron was nervous.

“As a coach to somebody that’s been to all the Games and this is the first time ... coaching him, there’s pressure on me, for sure,” he said. “If he doesn’t make it, is it my programming?”

Still, Bergeron said he was also “quietly confident.”

“I knew Chris had done the work,” he said.

Spealler did make it.

And when Bergeron found out it was official, he celebrated in his own way.

“I did a fist pump, hugged my wife, Heather, and then went outside and stared at the sun with my eyes closed,” he said.

The Road Ahead

For the period before the Games, Spealler will adhere to training similar to that of his preparation for the Regional.

“Maintain the strength, but try to work on weaknesses,” Bergeron said. “Keep the athlete confident.”

He continued: “For Chris, what kept him off the podium (in 2011) was heavier weights and higher loads. We attacked that really, really hard.”

In the two months leading up to the Regional, the programming changed to “try to get his met-cons back,” Bergeron said.

He also timed Spealler’s rest intervals and reviewed them in workout videos Spealler sent to Bergeron every day.

Spealler is “a good athlete,” Bergeron said, so he can lift heavy.

“(It’s) how quickly can you get through it,” he explained.

Generally, the focus will be on strength with programming that includes heavier weight at higher repetitions, followed by improving conditioning.



Bergeron, top, is recognized as one of CrossFit’s top coaches and programmers.

"Working on weaknesses, but at the same time we want to maintain strength," Bergeron said. "Training for the Games is definitely like training for the Regionals. They're going to throw some stuff that's outside the box."

"I think there's still a lot of room for me to make some improvements before showing up at the Games. (I'm) trying to change up the stimulus."

—Chris Spealler

Spealler, meanwhile, said he still can make gains.

"I think there's still a lot of room for me to make some improvements before showing up at the Games," he said. "(I'm) trying to change up the stimulus."



Spealler's rapid-fire handstand push-ups earned him a first-place finish for Event 1, with a time of 1:52.

As for his coach, Spealler had good things to say about Bergeron, whom he spoke to shortly after his podium finish at the Regional.

"He was super cool, congratulated me and told me I definitely kept him on the edge of his seat," the CrossFit Park City owner said. "He's been great at setting some goals between now and the Games. We're going to try to move forward with the programming."

A Regional to Remember

Arguably, the South West Regional was one of the most competitive men's regions in the world.

Spealler entered the three-day event ranked second based on his Open performance, behind fellow 2011 Games competitor Zach Forrest. Patrick Burke and Matt Chan, who also competed at last year's Games, were vying for top spots, too.

After a then-record-setting time of 1:52 in the first workout—Diane—Spealler remained in second place overall. The performance was patented Spealler: lightning-fast. But the day's second workout would be different: a 2,000-meter row, 50 pistols and then the killer: 30 225-lb. hang cleans. In other words: 5-foot-5 Spealler would have to clean 72 lb. above his body weight from a less-than-ideal position. He finished the workout in 6:10, placing 13th in the event. Still, he held on to second overall.

"For Chris, what kept him off the podium (in 2011) was heavier weights and higher loads. We attacked that really, really hard."

—Ben Bergeron

Had it not been for Bergeron's coaching, as well as the bodybuilding and powerlifting regime to which he had been adhering for the months following last year's Games, Spealler wouldn't have finished that workout, he said afterward.

The next days wouldn't be any kinder to "an athlete Chris size," Bergeron said at the end of Day 1.

Saturday brought one-armed 100-lb. dumbbell snatches and sprints. Again, Spealler managed the weight. It didn't look easy, but it didn't crush him. At 6:19, he placed 19th in the workout. The finish sunk him to sixth overall.

In the second event of the day—just like in the second event of the previous day—Spealler was calm and methodical in his approach. The medley of back squats, pull-ups, shoulders-to-overheads, front squats and overhead squats was a workout few men finished in the first three heats. Spealler came in second, behind Matt Chan, at 17:53. He bumped up one notch to fifth overall.

But, alas, there was still a day to go. And it was equally—if not, more—unforgiving than its predecessors.

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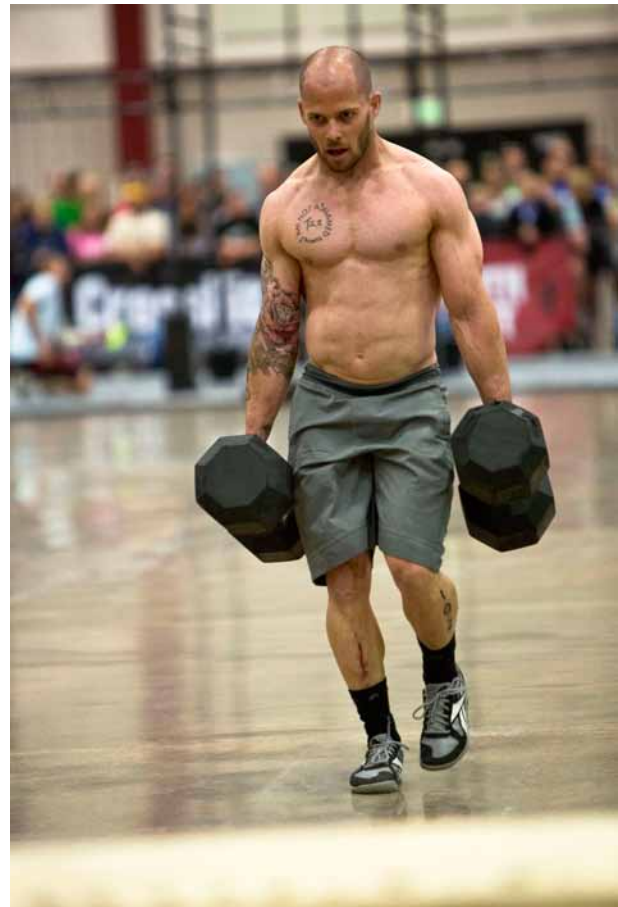
—Chris Spealler

First, a snatch ladder from 155 to 295 lb. Spealler hit 225 lb.—a 10-lb. PR—on his second attempt to roars of the crowd. He edged up to fourth overall. For the final workout, the brutality was: 3 rounds of 7 deadlifts at 345 lb. 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.

It was the event that had spectators both giddy with anticipation and anxious with thoughts that Spealler might not go to the Games for the first time. The result was impressive to witness.

It was clear something was different about Spealler. The deadlifts were heavy, but not impossible. The wall-balls were many, but smooth.

And although Chan outpaced him after the last set of toes-to-bars, Spealler caught up. As Chan rested between each of the last 3 muscle-ups, Spealler dropped his dumbbells and immediately jumped on the rings for three unbroken reps. The two men ended up tied for second in the workout at 15:24.



After setting a 10-lb. PR in the snatch ladder, Spealler knew he had a shot at the Games if he performed well in the grueling Event 6.

Chan won the Regional; Burke came in second.

“(There was) nothing more that I could have done (to) prepare,” Spealler said in the week following the Regional. “Things were really difficult. I was still ready.”

Although he knew he had a challenging road ahead after Day 2, Spealler said he never entertained the idea of not going to the Games.

“I was still hopeful,” he said. “I knew that there was a chance.”

And as riveting as the last event was, it wasn't the workout that would send him to California.

“The snatch is what made the biggest difference, for sure,” Spealler said.

Going into the last day, Bergeron described his mood as nervous, once again.

"I knew the other guys' numbers," he said. "He had to hit 225."

As for the final workout, Spealler had already done it at his own box.

"So I knew what I was in for," he said. "It was still pretty nasty, though."

Plus, Bergeron had given him a strategy, of sorts, for the workout: "Don't worry about the last 3 muscle-ups. They're going to be there."

So they were.

Realistic Expectations

Spealler's best placing at the Games came in 2010, when he finished third and won the Spirit of the Games Award. It was the first time the legendary CrossFitter had reached the podium. But it didn't quell his desire for first place.

Hence, the bodybuilding and powerlifting routine that began shortly after the 2011 Games. It involved eating about 4,700 calories a day, as well as decidedly un-CrossFit-like exercises, such as the Tate press, biceps curls and lateral raises. At his heaviest, Spealler had gained 11 lb. At the Regional, he was 153 lb., 8 lb. heavier than he was at last year's Games.

**"Spealler finds a way. He
always finds a way."**

—Zach Forrest

"I think Chris still has a shot of winning the Games," Bergeron said. "Rich (Froning) is still (at the) forefront and a leader, and there's a few others that are really strong. A lot depends on the programming."

"Does he have the potential? Absolutely. But there's 10 to 15 guys who have that potential," said Forrest, who spends time with Spealler as a fellow HQ trainer. "He definitely has the potential (to podium), but I don't think it's going to be as easy as it was in previous years."

Having said that, he added that he looks forward to training with Spealler because "you're always going to learn something."

Undoubtedly, he will be one of the most exciting athletes to watch at this year's Games, Forrest noted.

"There are times when you think, 'Oh my God, this is going to crush him,' and he kills it. Spealler finds a way. He always finds a way," he said. "If it's possible, he will find a way."



Courtesy of Andrea 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**.*