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## Road to the Top 10

Former all-American volleyball player and Olympic weightlifter Lindsey Valenzuela went from 34<sup>th</sup> at last year's Games to ninth this year—and she has bigger goals in 2013.

Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

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By Andréa Maria Cecil

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All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

In July, Lindsey Valenzuela finished the CrossFit Games in ninth place, jumping 25 spots from 2011 and meeting her goal of making the top 10 in 2012.

"It was an amazing arc in a year," said her coach, Dusty Hyland. "She climbed the ladder and the competition got stiffer. For her, we've seen a lot of growth as an athlete on a mental level, on a competitive level and on a physical level, which is good—that's what we're looking for as coaches."

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**—Dusty Hyland**

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Valenzuela finished this year's Games one spot ahead of Becca Voigt, who took bronze last year. And she finished five places behind Kristan Clever, the 2010 Games champion who placed second in 2011. Like Valenzuela, Clever and Voigt train at Valley CrossFit in Van Nuys, Calif.

"I was extremely happy," Valenzuela said. "I knew what I wanted to accomplish. I knew that I wanted to finish every workout and I knew I wanted to make it to the third day. And I knew it was a possibility to make it in the top 10."

She added: "I didn't doubt myself."

In the Games' two-part opening event at Camp Pendleton—a swim-bike-run two days earlier than athletes anticipated—Valenzuela placed 12th in Pendleton 1 and 21st in Pendleton 2. It was a more-than-respectable finish for an athlete who had focused on strength for much of her career.

"Coming from a weightlifting background, that's huge," Hyland said. "If we can make the kind of gains we did next year that we did this year, she'll be in the top five."

### **Volleyball, Oly and CrossFit**

As a collegiate volleyball player, Valenzuela began performing the Olympic lifts as part of her sport-specific training. The explosive snatch and clean and jerk proved useful in improving her game at California Lutheran University, where she was a three-year all-American.



***Valenzuela showcased her improved gymnastics skills on the parallel handstand push-ups, a movement that challenged many Games athletes.***



*She can also snatch 195 lb.*

In her junior year, Valenzuela—then known by her maiden name, Benson—made the All-Conference First Team. In her senior year, she earned spots on the American Volleyball Coaches Association All-American Second Team, the association’s West Region First Team and the All-Southern California Intercollegiate Athletic Conference First Team.

As of 2010, Valenzuela’s 127 career aces were the third highest in Cal Lutheran’s history and were the second highest total of the decade. As a setter, Valenzuela led the college to 44 wins in two seasons. After she graduated—in June 2010—she was named to the school’s Volleyball 2000-09 All-Decade Team.

Valenzuela had already begun competing in Olympic weightlifting in 2006, just after her freshman year at Cal Lutheran. She found CrossFit three years later as she was ending her volleyball career. Mere months later, she qualified for her first CrossFit Games Regional. But it wasn’t until 2011 that Valenzuela qualified for the Games.

“It’s been pretty interesting because I sure remember going with her to the 2010 Sectionals ... and she didn’t have chest-to-bar pull-ups. And the next year she went to

Regionals, she didn’t have muscle-ups,” said her husband, Arsenio. “It seemed like this year it was a culmination of the last three and a half, four years of work.”

One of the biggest changes from 2011 and 2012 was Valenzuela’s coach.

The two met at the 2011 Southern California Regional, where Hyland spoke to Valenzuela after she didn’t finish the Amanda workout on Day 3.

“I said, ‘Ya know, you’re a tremendous athlete. I can help you out,’” recounted Hyland, co-owner of DogTown CrossFit in Culver City, Calif. “She was missing some very basic things that could be improved upon and could have an immediate impact.”

At the time, Valenzuela was focused on Olympic-weightlifting nationals, where she placed second in the 75-kg weight class.

After the 2011 Games ended, she and Hyland began meeting for workouts and gymnastics work.

Hyland competed at the Junior Olympic National Championships in gymnastics and trained with the U.S. Olympic Team. In college, he competed in NCAA Division 1 men’s gymnastics.

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**—Dusty Hyland**

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“We had a good time together,” Hyland said. “We see the world of competition in a similar way. We started training together more and more and we started to see more success.”

After making significant strides in her gymnastics that boosted her confidence, Valenzuela started to see improvement in her workouts and her recovery time. And so she and Hyland increased their training time together, and he began programming more for her.

“What I really saw immediately in Lindsey was her competitiveness, her passion and her enthusiasm for CrossFit,” Hyland said. “She really loves working out and enjoys what she does, and so do I.”

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### **CrossFit or Oly?**

Had Valenzuela dedicated herself solely to Olympic weightlifting, she could have won the national championship. So says Bob Takano, who coached her from December 2010 to July 2011.

Highly respected in the weightlifting world, Takano is credited with developing and coaching some of the country’s best lifters for nearly 40 years. A 2007 inductee into the U.S.A. Weightlifting Hall of Fame, he has coached four national champions, seven national record holders and 28 top 10 nationally ranked lifters. Fifteen of the volleyball players he coached earned Division 1 scholarships.

To boot, his articles have been published by the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) and the International Olympic Committee, and they helped to establish standards for coaching the Olympic lifts. He is a former member of the editorial board of the *NSCA Journal* and an instructor for the University of California, Los Angeles extension program. He is the chairperson of the NSCA Weightlifting Special Interest Group. Takano is also part of the seminar staff for CrossFit Olympic Lifting Trainer courses, and he’s a frequent contributor to the *CrossFit Journal*.

He described Valenzuela as very well-coordinated, very competitive and possessing a good work ethic—despite her minor protests of workouts.

“She complains all the way through a workout, but she does it,” Takano said.

When Valenzuela approached him, she did so as a CrossFitter.

“She wanted to do both,” he said. “She actually would have made more progress as a weightlifter.”

Training for two different sports, Takano added, doesn’t work.

“If you’re going to be really super good at either one, you need to specialize,” he explained.

Today, Valenzuela has her eye on CrossFit.

“Right now I’m very happy focusing on CrossFit and the future I see for myself in the sport of CrossFit,” she said. “I don’t foresee myself entering in a national (weightlifting) meet or international (weightlifting) meet in the close future, but that does not mean it will never happen. I’m only 25 years old and I feel that I have a long future in both sports.”

The lifts have been one of her strengths, said Valenzuela, who has a 195-lb. snatch and a 235-lb. clean and jerk.

“I don’t want to stop doing that,” she said.

And especially not now that Games competitors are on her heels.

“A lot of girls this year didn’t get past 200 lb. (on the Clean Ladder),” she said. “That was a nice surprise, but I also see girls are getting stronger.”



***In 2011, Valenzuela decided to focus solely on CrossFit, despite her promise as an Olympic weightlifter.***



**Valenzuela thinks the CrossFit Games will just get heavier—and she's ready.**

Valenzuela was one of two women to finish the ladder, which topped out at 235 lb. Elisabeth Akinwale was the other, and she beat Valenzuela in the event by pulling a few extra deadlifts as a tiebreaker. The 33-year-old finished seventh at the Games.

"I feel lifting is a huge priority in my training regime and programming," Valenzuela said. "It may not be at the same volume it was when I was just focusing on Olympic lifting, but it (is) an aspect that is included in my programming on a daily basis. Lifting is something I'm great at and is something that puts me ahead of a lot of girls. I plan on keeping it that way and plan on lifting the rest of my life."

The loads, she added, will only get heavier at CrossFit competitions.

"Every CrossFit (woman) should have some sort of strength program incorporated into (her) programming in order to handle the weights we may see in future programming," Valenzuela said.

### Goals for 2013

For the new training year, Valenzuela's programming will mostly be the same.

"I want to keep training the way I have been training—train smart," said the middle-school and high-school strength-and-conditioning coach. "And I want to keep that happy balance between CrossFit and my work life and my personal life."

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**"She's one of the most explosive athletes in the CrossFit community."**

**—Dusty Hyland**

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For the Open, Valenzuela is keeping it simple: just qualify for the Regional.

"And for Regionals, I have bigger goals for myself," she started. "But I'm not trying to think too far ahead right now. I'm just trying to focus on what I need to get better at."

That includes endurance. "During the longer workouts I kind of second-guess myself," Valenzuela explained. "I guess, mentally, just be better prepared for the longer workouts."

For Hyland, he wants to address weaknesses that led to low finishes at the Games, including 37th in the O-Course, 39th in the Broad Jump and 25th in the Rope-Sled.

"What we're going to do this season is get her more prepared for the unknown," he said. "She's going to get a heavy dose of gymnastics and weightlifting."

Plus, Hyland said he plans to "up the cycle" of explosive barbell movements.

"She's one of the most explosive athletes in the CrossFit community," he noted.

Valenzuela, who has signed up for various competitions, said she will remain in off-season mode until October.

"I'm not pushing anything right now. I'm not looking to go to any competitions. If I feel like going, I will," she said. "I'm doing what my programming requires of me and I'm just going with the flow. I don't want to focus on competing until I'm mentally ready (to)."

For the time being, Valenzuela said she wants to focus on getting stronger, faster and better than her competitors.

"The next couple of months will be challenging because I will be working (a lot) on skills and will be focused on my weaknesses, which will not only be challenging physically, but mentally taxing as well," she said.

"Life's short. If we didn't like to do this and training together, we wouldn't," Hyland said. "I think that ultimately if you're looking for a coach, you need to find someone you can deal with on a personal level as well as professional level."

Hyland added: "We're very vocal together. That's sort of who she is."



**After finishing 37th in the O-Course, Valenzuela will spend the next year attempting to prepare for the unknown.**



Courtesy of Andréa Maria Cecil

### About the Author

*Andréa Maria Cecil is the Regional Community Media Director for the Australia, Europe and North East regions. She was also the North East Regional Media Director for the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games. Cecil has been a freelance writer and editor for the **CrossFit Journal** since 2010 and also writes for the CrossFit Games site. She 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 four days a week to training the Olympic lifts herself at **McKenna's Gym**.*