
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Valley Girl's Vertigo

After a year of training for a podium spot at this year's CrossFit Games, Becca Voigt reached her goal—while battling two forms of vertigo. Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

September 2011



All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

On the second round of muscle-ups, she started to feel it. Something wasn't right.

She continued, moving on to 10 165-lb. deadlifts, 15 GHD sit-ups and then the 100-yard sprint. But in the first third of the run, Becca Voigt fell on all fours.



Becca Voigt went down in the Triplet Sprint event, but she was most certainly not out.

"We need a medic!" the emcee yelled into the microphone as spectators stared.

"I was dead set on not letting that happen," Voigt said more than a month after the Games. "I finished, got back to the rings. Kris Clever was still going, so I knew I had a good chance of doing the workout on time."

And she did. Voigt finished the second day's first workout with a time of 10:50, tying Gretchen Kittelberger for 15th.

"She was unbelievable. I was not expecting her to do what she did."

—Dr. Matthew McAlees

"By the time I was done, I felt really bad. I felt awful," she recalled. "My coach was trying to get me coconut water, food. We didn't know what was going on."

But Voigt's coach knew exactly what was going on. Doug Katona had seen this before.

Nine days before the Games, Voigt had been in a car accident.

"I was actually driving, getting ready to turn, and this lady was going in the opposite direction in traffic and turned left across two lanes and must not have seen that I was coming," she said. "I hit the lady on her passenger-side door, front on."

The accident sent Voigt's car to the shop for three weeks and her to massage therapy for her neck and shoulders.

"I freaked out when it happened because I was scared I wasn't going to be able to compete," she remembered.

But she did. And she didn't just compete; she finished third overall. And she didn't just finish third; she took a podium spot while battling two forms of vertigo.

"She was unbelievable," said Dr. Matthew McAlees, the lead chiropractor at the Games, who worked on Voigt. "I was not expecting her to do what she did."

"Like Static on a TV"

Watching Voigt fall during the Saturday-morning workout was like a flashback, said Katona, CrossFit Endurance managing partner and head coach.

Over the years, he's worked with enough athletes fighting vertigo and other similar ailments that he recognized it when he saw it.

"Everybody thought she tripped on the turf, but she fell down because her spatial orientation was off. At that moment, I knew what happened," he said. "That's not her. I knew it right away."

That day was the first time Voigt went to see McAlees, who adjusted her neck and her cervical spine.

She finished the day's second and third events in seventh and 17th place, respectively.

But not without vertigo.

"I felt awful," she said. "I was just ready for the day to be over."

When Sunday morning arrived, Voigt was in a bad state.

"She was vomiting, she was dizzy, she was not in good shape," Katona said.

As she sat with the other Games athletes to be briefed on the day's first event, she was feeling "really bad," she said.

She thought to herself, "I'll probably be top 20, and I'll be happy with that and I can just call it then," she said.



Despite battling vertigo, Voigt managed to take 15th in the first event on Day 2, which kept her in the running for a podium spot.

“Everybody thought she tripped on the turf, but she fell down because her spatial orientation was off. At that moment, I knew what happened.”

—Doug Katona

Afterward, she went to see McAlees, who suggested the Epley maneuver.

The maneuver involves multiple steps in which the patient’s head and body are repositioned several times in an effort to get the tiny calcium carbonate crystals that sit in the inner ear back into place. The crystals are what tell the brain where the body is in space.

Voigt had knocked some of the crystals out of place during the muscle-ups and GHD sit-ups, McAlees said.

Not only that, but two of her spinal bones were out of alignment and compressed the nerves going out to the ear that control equilibrium.

“Like static on a TV—that’s exactly what it’s like,” he said. “There’s static from the ear to the brain.”

Not one but two forms of vertigo, McAlees said.

“So not only was she getting kind of overloaded, the rocks being dislodged were causing an abnormal motion in the ear. More importantly, the bones in the cervical spine compressed the nerve,” he said, “and didn’t allow ear and brain to communicate correctly.”

The Epley maneuver is aimed at getting the crystals back into their correct spots. But if it didn’t work, it would make matters worse.

And so between Voigt and Katona, the decision was made to perform the maneuver.

“It completely freaked me out,” Voigt said.

Nonetheless, it worked.



Voigt knew a pre-Games car accident would affect her in competition, but she wasn’t sure how.

“There Was This Surge”

“I sit down for 10 minutes; things start to get a little bit better,” Voigt said.

As the first workout of Day 3 drew closer, she started her warm-up.

“I wanted to just sit down,” she said.

“I didn’t want her going out there, doing a handstand push-up and then putting something overhead and having a bar fall on her head.”

—Doug Katona

The workout was 3 rounds of 30 double-unders and 10 95-lb. overhead squats, then 3 rounds of 10 handstand push-ups and a 40-ft. sled push (sled weight plus 275 lb.).

"I didn't know how being inverted was going to be, and I didn't want to try it beforehand," Voigt said.

Privately, Katona was thinking safety had to come first.

"I had to take my coaching hat off and put my friend hat on. I didn't want her going out there, doing a handstand push-up, and then putting something overhead and having a bar fall on her head," he said. "I didn't voice that; it was all going on in my head."

So after discussing the strategy for the workout, he put her through a light warm-up, then a secondary warm-up to get her sweating more than usual. That, he said, was key.

"It might have been the difference maker," Katona said.

As Voigt waited in the tunnel to enter the competition floor, she started to feel better.

"There was this surge and I felt great," she said. "I thought, 'OK, it's all better.'"

And so she got through the workout without incident, finishing third in a time of 8:08.

"The rest of the night, I didn't feel great, but I was on a high from finishing third."

—Becca Voigt



Voigt received treatment after the Triplet Sprint and started feeling better by Day 3, even if she wasn't 100 percent.

"I push the sled to the end of the wall, I was spinning," she said.

Almost immediately she went off the floor and back on McAlees' table for another Epley maneuver.

"I sit for 45 minutes to an hour. Things are starting to get better," she said. "I take a small nap. My appetite is coming back."

When it's time for the three-part workout that ended the Games, "I'm feeling pretty good," she said.

"I did the workout, felt good. When I finished, I had a little bit of spinning, but it wasn't bad at all. The rest of the night, I didn't feel great, but I was on a high from finishing third," Voigt said.



Voigt was first, second and second in the three parts of The End, and her strong finish put her on the podium.

Voigt finished first in Part 1 of The End, then took second in Part 2 and Part 3. She shared the podium with winner Annie Thorisdottir and 2010 winner Kristan Clever, her Valley CrossFit training partner.

"It Will Go Away"

Unfortunately, the high of the podium didn't quell the vertigo the next day or the day after.

"When I woke up on Tuesday morning, I was spinning really bad. Nothing I could do would stop the spinning," she said. "I would move too fast, I would spin again."

That week was filled with visits to an ear, nose and throat doctor and a neurologist, and Voigt underwent MRIs and MRAs. "It wasn't until Friday of that week that everything started to feel really normal," she said.

As of early September, Voigt said she was trying to be conscious in avoiding activities that set off the vertigo.

"This week, I finally got back on the GHD, got my mind off the fear. I realized if I'm going to compete, that will come up eventually. I couldn't be afraid of it," she said on Sept. 2.

Of the vertigo she said, "It will go away."

Minus the roughly 10 days Katona gave her after the Games to "go have some fun," Voigt has been training for the 2012 Games.

"Right now, she's right on schedule. We have a pretty strategic way to how we're approaching things this year," he said. "We're trying to expose weaknesses and movement patterns."

**"What's beautiful about Becca
is she's humbly driven."**

—Doug Katona

Despite her story of perseverance, Voigt initially was reluctant to talk about the vertigo she battled during the Games.

"I don't want it to be that thing," she explained. "Other people go through a lot of things ... to get to the Games."

Katona wasn't surprised.

"What's beautiful about Becca is she's humbly driven," he said of Voigt, a coach at the Valley CrossFit box in Van Nuys, Calif. "She's very coachable. She communicates well, she always wants to better herself, and she wants to show people that CrossFit's a great sport. And I think she wants to show women that CrossFit is a great sport."

Had the Games continued for another two or three workouts, Katona said, Voigt would have gotten stronger. Both athlete and coach were focused on the podium, he said.

"I gotta tell ya that there's a lot of athletes that I've been around in my day, and she's got a pretty unique ability. At the right moment when she needs to kind of have that vision, that focus, that determination, she really flips that switch and does it about as good as anybody," he said. "It's a testament to her not just as an athlete, but as a human being."

Meanwhile, the chiropractor to whom Voigt said she is forever grateful said he was floored by her performance.

The fact that Voigt was able to compose herself, McAlees said, "is wow."

"I don't know if there was a greater triumph at the Games than what happened with her," he said. "I don't know if there was anyone who busted their ass, worked harder to do what she did."



Courtesy of Andréa Maria Cecil

**"I don't know if there was
a greater triumph at the
Games than what
happened with her."
—Dr. Matthew McAlees**

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.*

McAlees heads Maximized Living, a chiropractic group based in Charlotte, N.C., that works with Olympic-level and professional teams.

In a situation like Voigt's, the psychological effects on an athlete can be difficult to ignore, he said.