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Exporting CrossFit: Chris Spealler in India

In December 2009, Chris Spealler traveled from Utah to India to visit Sri Ram Ashram. While there, he traded CrossFit coaching for cricket and dance instruction, inspiring many young athletes along the way.

By **Rashmi Cole** Sri Ram Ashram

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After spending one year training with Jim Baker at Crossfit Santa Cruz Central, I returned to India full of CrossFit gusto only to face the realities of training alone with less than optimal equipment. In what I now call “a moment of selfish inspiration,” I offered the oldest boys a bribe: CrossFit with me and skip morning group exercise.

They took the bait and we have never looked back.

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Finding a Role Model

While I am happy with completion of workouts, young men eventually want to see where they stand against others, and I could see the demeanor of the boys changing upon discovering CrossFit monsters lifting impossibly huge weights. On average, the boys are 5'7" and weigh 130 lb. When they saw what a 180-lb. person can lift they immediately hatched plans to bulk up.

The last thing I wanted was for them to become dissatisfied with their body type. It was sad to watch them suddenly wish they were something other than what they are. I began a quest for positive smaller male role models and quickly happened upon Chris Spealler.

Together, the boys and I studied Speal's numbers. We hauled out the calculator and did the math. Yes, his deadlift is lighter but is still comparable to the big guys when you factor in body weight. We marveled at his Cindy performance (close to 40 rounds) and incredible met-con abilities. For us he became the ideal athlete, the one who made it OK to be small.

Last summer I met Chris at the CrossFit Games, when he sent a note of encouragement to the children. A few months later, he e-mailed with a proposal to visit.





A Visit From Speal

Meanwhile, our CrossFit program was growing. Along with the older boys, ages 16-19, CrossFit Kids started for the 12-15 age group. About a month ago we started *CrossFit Peelayas* ("puppies" in Hindi) for children 8-11. Almost half of our 65 ashram children are now doing CrossFit.

In his e-mail, Chris said he had one week to travel and didn't know what a trip to India entailed. It's a 20-hour flight (not counting layovers), plus a six-hour train ride to our town, so I assumed Chris would come to his senses once he figured that out. It was amazing he wanted to come at all, but I wasn't very optimistic about an actual visit.

In spite of the great distance between Utah and India, a date was soon set and tickets purchased. Lists of instructions flew back and forth: don't smile at monkeys, bring your own TP, expect zero protein, and always travel with a flashlight for electrical outages. I could finally tell the kids that Coach Spealler was on his way.

As Chris' visit grew closer, the excitement was palpable. Nine-year-old Deepak, who was born precocious, told me he needed to discuss his burpee technique with Coach Speal. Vijai Raj, our CrossFit fanatic, fretted that he wouldn't be able to come home from college. Our guests wondered what "a Spealler" was. The rest of the kids doubled their CrossFit efforts and continuously asked to see online photos of "Coach."

106 Pull-Ups?

Early in December 2009, we picked Chris up from the train station at midday. He had arrived at his Delhi hotel around midnight and caught the 7 a.m. train to Haridwar—the guy had to be tired. Within minutes of arrival, Chris' ashram tour was aborted when he immediately became embroiled in a field-hockey game. Who knew Coach Speller could play field hockey?

Soon after, classes started. The *peelays* are a wonderfully enthusiastic group that's totally out of control. As they gathered around Coach, Deepak asked him how many pull-ups he could do. Chris said 106, a number that impresses CrossFitters worldwide. Deepak asked, "In one second?" Chris started to explain before realizing there wasn't a conversation to be had.

After mastering skin-the-cat, games and a WOD, the Crossfit Kids group had a class. In the final class with the big boys, Chris devised a team workout: two teams of three boys each with Chris alone as the third team. Jaws dropped when the boys realized Coach was going to do the full team workout alone: 50 power cleans (65 kg), 150 pull-ups and 150 box jumps. Jaws dropped further when they saw the smooth power of his cleans. I was just amazed that he was still standing after the long journey. I assume he eventually got tired, but I never saw it.

I always tell visitors to the ashram that if they want the inside track to the children, bone up on cricket and Bollywood. Day 2 started with Chris announcing he wanted to learn cricket. Obviously, Coach had done his homework. After an early morning technique class with the oldest group, Chris headed out to the cricket field for a batting and bowling lesson. Schoolchildren gathered around to see the visitor with huge muscles try to smack the cricket ball. Soccer followed, and the Frisbee flew whenever possible.



Crushing It With Coach Speal

We quickly settled into a schedule: early morning classes with the big boys, after-school classes for *peelays* and kids, followed by a lecture/demonstration and question-and-answer period for all who were interested. In between, Coach nailed WODs. Surrounded by a crowd each time, he showed the children the mental and physical power of an elite athlete.

There were many great memories of Coach's visit. Who can forget Deepak flying over Chris during the leap-frog relay? Or when the *peelays* challenged Chris and Vijai to a game of tug-of-war? The kids jumped the gun, pulled on the count of two and whooped their butts. After explaining the 80 percent vs. 20 percent ratio of proper technique to effort and intensity, the kids decided that Coach wasn't doing his workouts properly because clearly no one could go faster and his technique was perfect. He wasn't following the CrossFit rules.

I'll certainly remember the pure amazement on their faces as Chris tackled a workout they had just completed, and my favorite memories include watching Chris coach the kids onward. It's a sweet moment watching one of the best coaches coach your child to completion of a WOD.

On Chris' final night, the children gave Coach their highest honor: a high-energy dance show and thank-you cards. I think Chris has safely sequestered the videotape featuring his dance performance, but it's safe to say that he now has a little education in the fine art of Bollywood.

For the rest of their lives these children will have Coach Spealler as their example. The intensity and max effort he puts out will always remain a marker for them—pretty heady stuff for children from rural India.

A huge thank you to Chris for coming to Sri Ram Ashram, and to Crossfit Headquarters for supporting his visit.



About the Author

*An American from California, Rashmi Cole has been helping run Sri Ram Ashram near Haridwar, India, since the early 1990s. She discovered CrossFit in 2005 and was briefly trained by Greg and Lauren Glassman. She brought the program back to the ashram, and her success is documented in the CrossFit Journal article *CrossFit in the Ashram*, published Jan. 19, 2009. If you would like to know more about Sri Ram Ashram or donate much-needed equipment, contact Rashmi Cole at rashmisra@gmail.com.*