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The Fire Inside

How do intangibles like passion and belief in self fit into a community driven by data? Web Smith explains.

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Staff/CrossFit Journal

Determination, faith and the value of conquering the “fear of failure” may fall outside the CrossFit pursuit of data-driven performance, but it’s apparent these factors existed for Matt Chan and Chris Spealler in the 2010 CrossFit Games.

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Just as the variables of CrossFit competition are unknown, so too are the depths of athletes' hearts, minds and faith. The intensity of their focus, faith and resolve may very well rival the actual intensity of their remarkable power output, and perhaps these intangible factors are at least partly responsible for the performances of these athletes. We cannot prove this, so we tend to avoid discussing the validity of these concepts. But can we dismiss them?

Mental Games: Spealler and Chan

Prior to the 2010 CrossFit Games, logic would have it that Chris Spealler would be absent from the podium. It only made sense that after a fourth-place finish at the 2007 CrossFit Games, a 10th-place finish in 2008, and a 26th-place finish in 2009, this maturing athlete would see a continuing degradation of skill, strength and endurance. That was simply not the case, and Spealler reached the podium at the CrossFit Games in 2010, finishing third.

A lot changed for Spealler between the 2009 and 2010 Games. With fatherhood came greater signs of a deeper investment in his own spiritual and emotional maturity and beliefs. He became more comfortable with his commitment to the sport of fitness.

"You have to put yourself in a position where you believe you can win," Spealler said in a recent interview. "You have to compete to win. If you go out there to not lose, you're not going to perform to the best of your ability."

Chris Spealler's CrossFit Games Record

2007—4th

2008—10th

2009—26th

2010—3rd

Matt Chan, then unknown, finished eighth at the 2008 Games, two spots ahead of Spealler. In 2009, with much stiffer competition and programming than years prior, the 32-year-old EMT finished 18th. One year later, in 2010, Chan also finished with his best CrossFit performance to date: a fourth-place finish, one spot behind Spealler.

In our interview with Chan, he reflected on 2009's 7.1-kilometer trail run and discussed it with considerable disappointment. Finishing 58th out of all male athletes, he contends that he submitted to the workout.

"The minute you say, 'Uh,' and submit, it's over. ... (If you think), 'I need to keep up with so and so,' it's over," he said.

Matt Chan's CrossFit Games Record

2008—8th

2009—18th

2010—4th

Consider how far each athlete has improved his performance. In 2007, Chan was clean and jerking 225 lb. and snatching 135 lb. At the 2009 Games, Spealler deadlifted 375 lb., an impressive lift for him but not nearly enough to compete in a max-effort deadlift event. Indeed, Spealler finished the event tied for 71st out of 74 competitors, and the poor Event 2 performance was one of the reasons the Utah athlete did not advance to the second day of competition.

If you've seen either Spealler or Chan perform lately, you'll notice that both have made incredible strides in the past years, and the greatest improvements seem to have been made between 2009 and 2010.

"If you go out there to not lose, you're not going to perform to the best of your ability."

—Chris Spealler



Staff/CrossFit Journal

In Event 1 at the 2010 CrossFit Games, Chris Spealler was faced with multiple snatches near his body weight. He won the event by 17 seconds.

Spealler, for instance, finished eighth in one of the heavier events at the 2010 Games, the 7-minute AMRAP deadlift/double-under/pistol workout, where he had to combine 7 deadlifts at 315 lb. with double-unders and pistols. Later in the year, he totaled 200 kg in the Olympic-lifting half of the CrossFit-USA Open on his way to winning the triplet and posting the top combined score of any athlete at the competition in any weight class.

For Chan, the USAW event was also a time to shine. Competing at home in Colorado, he won the 94-kg class with a snatch of 113 and a clean and jerk of 144. Do the

math and you'll realize Chan snatched more than he could clean and jerk in 2007, and he clean and jerked well over 300 lb.

The data says each athlete improved, and both of the athletes say that much of their improvements were due to intangible factors that aren't easily measured or quantified.

Observing Spealler and Chan over the past several months, I've had the privilege of understanding those ethereal factors that have helped them emerge as two of the sport's most elite males.

Being Honest With Oneself

There is a distinct sense of irony when comparing these two athletes. One is uncharacteristically large (for the sport), and the other is a bit smaller than the average male in both height and weight. With these physical differences come differing approaches to achieving victory at a competition where athletes must amplify their strengths, address their weaknesses and minimize any and all deficiencies.

For Spealler, a smaller athlete with unparalleled capacity at body-weight movements, overall strength was a challenge. Spealler addressed his weakness by working hard to bring up his strength, but he also made a mental change.

"I remember in the middle of my workout, I walked up to my barbell and said, 'So what,'" Spealler recalled. "I just remember saying in my head, 'So what. I don't care if it's 275 lb. It doesn't matter anymore. I'm going to own it.'"

For Chan, he also had to alter his thinking.

"I'm not going to be like, 'Oh, this isn't fair. It's gymnastics movements. I'm a big guy. Where's the big weights? Where's the one-rep max?'" he said.

With so many obvious strengths, Spealler and Chan have spent a fair amount of time analyzing the areas they would consider weaknesses. As CrossFitters, we understand the demands of the sport, but does understanding necessarily lead to action steps? Not all the time. The ability to identify one's own weaknesses and accept the vulnerability associated with fixing those deficiencies is rare. It's more common to avoid weaknesses, amplify strengths and hope the programming happens to favor your specialties.

Chan and Spealler chose a different path, and it's a path that requires a great deal of courage and mental strength. It takes an honest and committed athlete to look in the mirror and say, "I need to improve this area—a lot."



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Chris Spealler, always a master of body-weight movements, altered his mindset and decided heavy weights would never stand in his way again.

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—Matt Chan

Despite their differences, Chan and Spealler revealed remarkably similar motivations and mental-training techniques in independent interviews. The more I listened to each athlete, the more I began to view his ability to perform from a mental perspective. Are the lack of ego, the awareness of self and the recognition of one’s soul—intangible parts of the psychic apparatus—shared by CrossFit’s elite athletes?

Chan and Spealler have demonstrated that to be one of the very best, an athlete has to be comfortable with setting aside his ego and working past mental and physical weaknesses. It seems as though this is what separates Chan and Spealler from a worthy pack of also-rans. CrossFit helped each athlete achieve great success on the CrossFit Games’ international stage but to take full advantage of CrossFit’s potent training methodology, athletes have to be willing to be coachable and willing to address weaknesses. That takes guts.

In our interviews, both athletes shared parts of their past, perhaps shedding some light on the things that might be at least partially responsible for their successes.

After quitting swimming in high school, Chan developed a deep-seated resentment for starting something and not finishing. Not content with his decision, he went on to play water polo at Western Illinois University with success. Spealler, always competitive but always lacking peace of mind earlier in life, sought out Christian faith after his experience with Young Life, a nationally renowned Christian outreach program. He now cites his faith as his source of peace. Famously, Spealler chose some mellow Christian music by Jars of Clay as his soundtrack for the final event of the 2008 Games, a heavy event that threatened to knock him from the top spot and dash his hopes for an overall win.

“I needed to be in the right spot,” he reflected in the *CrossFit Journal* in 2009. “I knew it wasn’t going to be an easy workout. I gave it everything I had, but I knew the chances of me being the first one done were probably pretty slim.”

Both gentlemen competed as collegiate athletes at the highest levels. Both experienced competition, disappointment, and then success after recommitting themselves to their training and their sport. Both report being driven by a “fear of failure” that was replaced by self-esteem and a drive to prepare.

Goals and Faith

As noted above, Chan was able to clean and jerk 225 and snatch 135 in 2007. In the interview, Jeremy Thiel pointed out, “You didn’t have the strength, and three years later you’re one of the best of the best.” This question led Chan to reveal an experience he used in his journey as a CrossFit athlete, and an experience that developed into his passion for preparation.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

The 2009 Games were a low point for Spealler, who then refocused and finished on the podium for the first time in 2010.



Matt Chan decided it wasn't enough to wait for favorable events to come up, so he trained to be good at everything.

"I heard Josh Everett say that he warmed up to a 335-lb. clean and jerk," Chan said. "I wasn't happy until I got it."

Strength was a weakness for the former collegiate water-polo athlete. But his acquired ability to set aside ego, maintain motivation and see his goals to completion have helped him take full advantage of CrossFit programming in ways that many haven't, can't or won't.

The mental aspect of preparation and competition simply cannot be measured, but what's clear from Chan and Spealler is that it takes an element of emotional fervor to remain committed to the rigors of CrossFit. Specifically, top athletes have to be comfortable with experiencing short-term failure to achieve long-term success. And while certain programming or training might contribute to success, it's certain that the mental aspect of training contributes something as well.

Chan discussed removing emotion from skill assessment and remedial preparation.

"I've taken the emotion away from not being able to do things. The 2009-2010 year was a big eye-opener when it comes to that stuff (performing new movements)," he said.

For Spealler, being at peace with his progress was also a new development in 2010.

"You can get caught up with who you are and what you do. That happened to me in '09 at the Games," he said.

Spealler went even further and touched on faith and spirituality, things not often talked about in CrossFit, an intensely physical pursuit. While spirituality is not measurable, there is evidence that suggests it can play a role in sports, whether it's a player crossing himself before stepping up to the plate or pointing to the sky after a touchdown.

Spealler, like Chan, finds strength in his ability to fully prepare, and he trains at such a high level that his preparedness becomes gratifying. He believes that when he trains his hardest and gives his best effort, he is at peace—win or lose.

“For me, where I am—and to each their own—I’m a Christian. I’m a believer,” Spealler said. “As that, I have to constantly remind myself that I’m defined by my relationship with Christ.”

As such, Spealler’s faith helped him to see a greater purpose in his daily training. He talked about the relationship between faith and training in the article [Spirituality and CrossFit](#), published in mid-January 2011 on the CrossFit Games website.

In one of the most defining moments of the SICFIT interview with Spealler, Thiel further defines Spealler’s faith-based approach: “Your gratification was coming from your work ethic. Winning was like a cherry on top.”

More Than Muscle?

For these athletes, competition is a way of life. They both had distinguished NCAA careers, but neither has seen as much individual athletic success as in recent times. What happened between the 2009 and the 2010 Games to develop such a holistic approach? What helped them make impressive gains that might not be explained only by a training journal filled with times, loads and reps?

Perhaps the answer can be found in Coach Glassman’s now-famous quote: “The greatest adaption to CrossFit is between the ears.”

Training for the CrossFit Games is incredibly difficult. Year in and year out, competition improves, and so does the level of skill required to get to the Games and excel. There is nothing more beneficial for an athlete’s success than proper training, coaching and nutrition. But who’s to say an athlete’s faith and internal drive aren’t also important?



Staff/CrossFit Journal

How do you define the balance between the mental and physical aspects of CrossFit?

Everyone who competes at that level is mentally strong, and perseverance is a common trait, so perhaps it's worth looking at the mental and spiritual as well as the physical. If we do, we might begin to see how these immeasurable variables can play an integral role for athletes in the sport. After watching two extraordinary athletes improve so greatly in only one year, it might be time to begin discussing the validity of emotional and spiritual triggers that allow athletes to reach their fullest potential.

Companion Videos

For the complete interviews with these two athletes, please watch the companion videos.

The Spealler interview, he takes us through the reflection and perspectives that helped him finally achieve his podium finish in 2010. What you will see is an athlete with laser focus and unparalleled humility. A Christian from an early age, Spealler discusses how this past year he was finally able to be at peace with his ability. At the CrossFit-USA Open, I was able to closely observe his pre-competitive ritual, and that inner peace was apparent. There was no adrenaline boost or an outward showing of emotion. Rather, he glanced at his wife and newborn, smiled and carried on. Consistently, they were reminders of his peace. And just as consistently, Spealler got the weight overhead.

Chris Spealler interview: [Part 1](#) [Part 2](#)

In Chan's interview, he discusses his previous failures and how they affect him today. Driven by a strong sense of mental awareness and selflessness characteristic of first responders, Chan discusses how his breadth of experience as an athlete and an EMT have affected his ability to see goals through to the end. "You have to let your guard down a little bit," he says.

By removing his ego, being at peace and letting go of emotion, he believes he has accomplished more as an athlete.

For the Matt Chan interview, click [here](#).



About the Author

Web Smith works alongside Jeremy Thiel and a great team as the president and COO of SICFIT, a lifestyle brand, CrossFit video-production team and hub for the enthusiasts of the CrossFit sport. Web proudly competed as a member of CrossFit Central's sixth-place Affiliate Cup team in 2010. He and his wife, two-time Games competitor Lindsey Smith, are raising a smart, beautiful three-year-old named Alexis Leigh Smith, who is already the second fittest of the Smith family of three.