Learning to Win

Jeff Tincher explains how the CrossFit Competitors Course helped him put Lindy Wall on a path to the CrossFit Games.

By Jeff Tincher   **September 2013**

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What do most competitive CrossFit athletes have in common? They are all well developed in the 10 general physical skills, from cardiorespiratory endurance to strength, speed and agility. They are well-rounded athletes. They all practice constantly varied functional movements at high intensity in different time domains. They possess mental toughness that comes with doing multiple events over the course of a two- or three-day competition.

But successful athletes all have something else in common: a game plan.

Developing a game plan for such a new and evolving sport can be challenging—especially for the novice competitor. How to get started? What to do? How often to train?

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One of the easiest ways to get started is attending workshops and summits given by local coaches to learn from experts while refining skills in a variety of areas. More serious athletes will seek out a personal coach—local or remote—in hopes of developing into a CrossFit Games athlete. As competitor for over five years and a coach for almost eight, I am always trying to look for new tools and means to stay competitive and develop my athletes.

One of the newest and most comprehensive tools I've found is the CrossFit Competitors Course taught by Chris Spealler, Matt Chan and Eric O'Connor.

Competition and the Classroom

The CrossFit Competitors Course (CCC) prepares you for all aspects of a competition. Everything an athlete and coach must know is covered, including some tricks of the trade that Spealler, Chan and O'Connor have picked up from their competition experience, which includes many trips to the CrossFit Games between them.

The course is developed for athletes and coaches alike and is set up to give participants the feel of a competition weekend, with multiple workouts programmed on both days. A very interactive course, it addresses multiple topics, including assessing athletes, goal setting, nutrition, program development, programming, and practice of higher skilled gymnastic and weightlifting movements. The course also teaches how to break down a programming plan into macro-, meso- and microcycles and how to assess athletes using a unique tool called "the Spider Web."
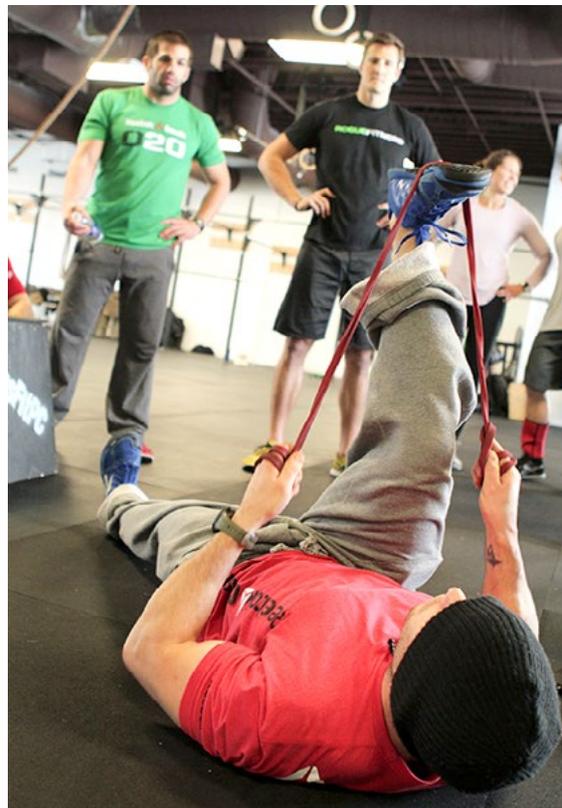
Eric O'Connor (top) and Chris Spealler (bottom) have extensive competition exerience dating back to the early days of the CrossFit Games.

The Spider Web that Chan, Spealler and O'Connor developed to analyze an athlete is a visual tool that's simple in design and yet comprehensive. The Spider Web serves as a guide to identify strengths and weaknesses of athletes and provides a starting place for programming. The Web has eight parts: metabolic conditioning in various modalities, mobility and flexibility, stamina (is it muscle fatigue or wind that causes an athlete to break?), Olympic lifting, cardiorespiratory endurance, high-skill gymnastics, high-volume gymnastics, and strength. Each section is then put on a rating scale of 1 (weakness) to 10 (strength).

Using a fictional athlete (Matt O'Spealler), participants design a program for him based on his benchmark recordings, fitness and athletic background, goals, and nutrition and sleep habits. The class is divided into small groups in which everyone collaborates and develops a path for Matt O'Spealler to follow. After the group breakout, the ideas and actions plans are presented. As with the rest of the weekend, this programming exercise is interactive, with no real right or wrong answers but lots of feedback from Chan, Spealler and O'Connor.

I came home from the course with a collection of benchmark statistics from past Games competitors, as well as a survey of the competitors' nutrition habits over the training season, during competitions and after a workout. The benchmarks included all major lifts, gymnastics movements, monostructural elements from multiple domains, and the times of several classic CrossFit benchmarks such as Fran, Filthy Fifty, Nate and Fight Gone Bad. These benchmarks provide a good starting point for athlete assessment and analysis and allow you to gauge where you or your athlete stacks up against CrossFit Games competitors. I was ready and eager to implement and test my new tools.

In 2013, Matt Chan tied Chris Spealler's record of six consecutive individual appearances in the CrossFit Games.

Lindy Wall finished second in the ZigZag Sprint event and showed impressive agility and speed over a short distance.

The Battle Test

I have been coaching Lindy Wall remotely since August 2012. When Lindy came to me, she had been doing CrossFit for two years and had just finished seventh at the 2012 Central East Regional. She had only one goal in mind: qualifying for the CrossFit Games in 2013. Her main weakness is well documented: Lindy has two fractures in the L5 vertebrae, spina bifida (which creates a third separation in L5) and scoliosis. Given these challenges, we are always cautious with her back and do a wide variety of accessory work to strengthen it.

I started by assessing her strengths and weaknesses using the Spider Web and comparing her numbers to the benchmark statistics from the Competitors Course.

Next came nutrition education, implementation and logging. Our approach was measuring and weighing food. Although the concept is not easy to grasp right away, once Lindy got the hang of it, it became easier to make adjustments because of the collected data.
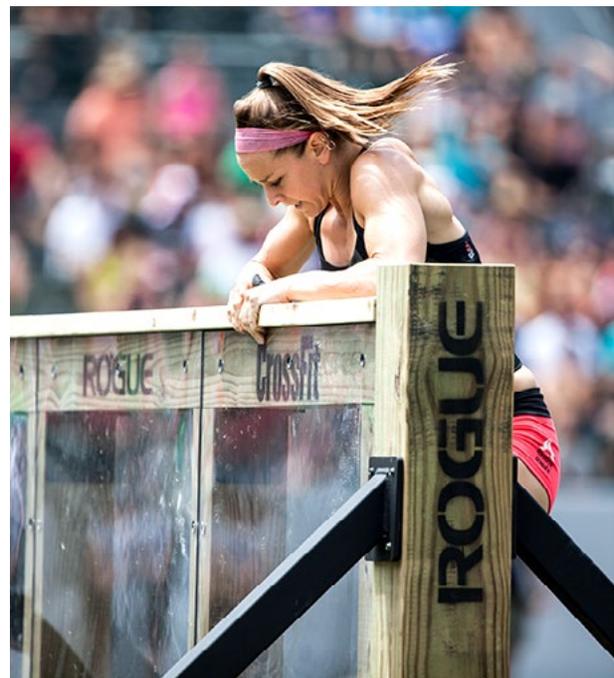
Wall finished 39th in the Sprint Chipper and Legless events, indicating areas where she can improve.

I have been weighing and measuring my food since 2008, and Chan does the same thing. What Chan has been doing differently is experimenting with his activity level based on training volume or stage of competition season.

When figuring out the baseline Zone-block prescription, we generally use 0.7 (on a scale of 0.1-1.0) as the activity-level coefficient. This is the coefficient I have been using since 2008. The formula to figure out a block prescription is lean body mass multiplied by an activity level of 0.7. The result is divided by 7 (the number of grams in a block of protein). The resulting number determines the blocks you eat per day. This works great for the average CrossFit athlete doing one workout per day.

Most competitors, like Chan, train more than the average CrossFit athlete, and workout volume is much higher.

Chan raised his coefficient to 0.85 or, in some cases, such as the CrossFit Games, up to 0.9. This increased his block prescription to compensate for the increase in work.

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For the last few years, I increased my own training to try and keep up with the rest of the competitors, but I did not

As a smaller athlete, Spealler has always been excellent in gymnastics events, and he's worked very hard to increase his strength to be competitive when the loads get heavy.

Learning ... (continued)

increase my block prescription. My food intake stayed the same even though I was doing more work, which made me regress.

When this idea was presented at the CCC, it made sense to me, and I was angry with myself for not thinking of it. After the course, I started playing with my activity factor and increased my food prescription, and I have seen gains in the last five months I haven't seen in the last few years.

I started Lindy on a baseline block prescription and began collecting data. During the weeks leading up to Regionals, we tweaked and played with the activity level until we found a place where the performance peaked and she was satisfied with the food intake. We used an activity level of 0.9, and her performance has taken off.

During the Open, Lindy did each workout only once while maintaining her training plan for the Regional. She placed ninth in her region in the Open and earned a trip to the next round, so it was time to implement the other tools from the Competitors Course.

After the Regional events were announced, we did a mock weekend test and practiced all the movements in a whole variety of ways, but we never repeated the weekend. Event 1 (Jackie) and Event 2 (the 3RM overhead squat) were the only two tested a few times. An equipment list was made and packed for the events (long socks, tape, jump ropes, a variety of shoes, two different styles of weighlifting belts, etc.). Lindy's mom was assigned as her "transportation assistant" to get her to and from the venue during down time in between athlete briefings and events.

A week out, we developed a meal plan for the entire weekend based on the events and the posted timeline. The food was bought, prepared, weighed and measured, and put in containers marked with the date and time of consumption. We also implemented post-workout active recovery and a post-workout meal immediately following the event.

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Appointments with athlete services at the Regional were made in advance and scheduled to be right after her post-WOD meal. After the appointment, Lindy's mom was ready to take her back to the hotel to decompress, relax and mentally prepare for the next event.

With all this preparation, Lindy got stronger as we got deeper into the weekend. She earned a tie for first in Event 4 and won events 6 and 7, qualifying for the CrossFit Games with a third-place overall finish. Her time in Event 6 was 17 seconds off the record, and her time in Event 7 was 7 seconds off the record. Watching all the work and preparation pay off over the weekend brought an incredible sense of gratification, joy and relief.

Chan has finished as high as second in the CrossFit Games (2012) and was 21st in 2013.

28th overall. Her best placing was second in the ZigZag Sprint event, in which she battled Michelle Crawford in the final and lost by 0.2 seconds.

As expected, some weaknesses were discovered: 39s in the Sprint Chipper and Legless events stand out as Lindy's lowest finishes at the Games. We'll analyze her overall performance and then hammer her weaknesses, and we'll be training to get stronger and fitter while working around Lindy's back issue.

The fitness of the CrossFit Games athletes continues to improve every year, and the competition gets tougher. As a coach or athlete, you need to be prepared and have as many tools as possible. In 2013, we learned that it's important to have a game plan whether you want to make it to Carson or just represent your box in a local throwdown.

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The Next Step

The CrossFit Games brought a variety of challenges for athletes, including Lindy. Regionals allowed us to target specific movements because the workouts were known, but that was not the case with the Games. We were back to the unknown and unknowable for which the Games are so famous. However, we felt more confident and prepared to break down, analyze and game plan events based on solid knowledge of Lindy's strengths and weaknesses, and I knew that great rest, recovery and nutrition strategies were already in place, which eliminated a lot of planning. The Games force you to deal with so many unknowns that it's important to control as many variables as you can.

When we arrived at the Games, we set a goal of making the top 30 cut and getting to participate in all events. That goal was accomplished: Lindy notched seven finishes between 20th and 30th, making the cut and eventually finishing

About the Author

Jeff Tincher competed in the 2008 and 2009 CrossFit Games, and he was the Mid Atlantic Regional Director in 2009 and 2011. With his wife Maggie, he is the owner of CrossFit Fairfax and CrossFit Reston. He has been a member of CrossFit's Level 1 Seminar Staff since 2008, and he has been a board member of the CrossFit Risk Retention Group since 2011. He serves as a firefighter with Fairfax County Fire and Rescue.