

Matthias
APPENZELLER
(SUI)



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Matthias APPENZELLER (SUI)

New kid on the board

At 26, Switzerland's Matthias Appenzeller is one of the new faces on the high diving circuit. Initially a 3m pool diver, he first entered a FINA competition in 2018, when he finished 16th in the World Cup in Abu Dhabi (UAE). In 2019, he took part in the two major meetings of the season, the World Championships in Gwangju (KOR), where he was 21st, and the World Cup in China, where he achieved his best ranking so far, 15th. Then came COVID-19 and the whole of 2020 was lost for competition. But Matthias remains confident that the months to come will be better and that he will rediscover the pleasure of competing with the best of the world in this discipline.

Born on June 21, 1994, he was only 18 when we find the first record of his participation in a FINA event – but not in high diving. In 2012, at the Diving Grand Prix meet in Bolzano (ITA), he finishes the 3m preliminaries in 29th position, a classification that he would not improve two years later at the Grand Prix in Madrid (ESP) where he finished 32nd.

Then, came a long pause, the conclusion of his law studies and his comeback to competition, from a much higher board! The transition was gradual but the pleasure of it was unparalleled for the Swiss athlete. Today, while working in a law firm, Matthias combines his professional life with the demanding preparation for his high diving career. Not simple, he admits, also because of the initial limitations due to the pandemic. But the motivation remains untouched and we may see in the competitions to come a new Matthias, with more complicated dives and a higher level of execution.

"I found again the adrenaline rush"

You were initially a 3m diver. How and when was the transition to high diving?
I quit springboard diving when I was 19 years old. I had a lot of injuries due to the heavy training schedule and I always wanted to do these extra training sessions. It was quite disappointing to see all these efforts being unfruitful in the end. Before I started high diving I turned away from diving completely for some years. It was just not what I wanted anymore. It was because of my friends that I went back on the tower and found again the happiness in the sport and in the adrenaline rush. It was like I was 17 again, chasing my goals.

What are the characteristics in high diving that you like and you couldn't find in pool diving?

It is a lot more familiar. Due to the higher risks of the sport and the few athletes at that high level, we hold together and try

to improve as a team. It is nice to see how everybody cares about the others. Moreover, the adrenaline rush after a new or really difficult dive from 27m is amazing. It is a feeling I feel nowhere else.

Your first FINA high diving competition was the World Cup in 2018. What was your feeling when you competed with all these high diving stars?

It felt amazing. Like I told you before, it is amazing how these other athletes help you. They know exactly how hard it is to get into it, overcome the fear and believe in your abilities when you are on the 27m tower. It doesn't make any difference who you are or from what country you come. It was also a dream come true. In springboard diving, I was never able to achieve that goal and suddenly in my 'second career', I was there together with the world best athletes.

"Gwangju was an amazing experience"

You were also in Gwangju for the 2019 FINA World Championships. Tell us about your experience there.

For me, every new venue is a challenge. Especially with the 'portable' FINA high diving tower I struggled in the beginning. But I was just happy that we are so privileged to travel to such amazing places and compete in such a surrounding. Also, the volunteers were amazing. Everything was really well organised.

Did you have any idols in this discipline? And in general, do you have idols in life?

In Switzerland, together with sports we also work a lot for our professional career

No pressure, just enjoy the flight and the good company – that is Matthias's motto

"I cannot make a living from high diving only"

Can you make a living from high diving or do you do something else professionally?

Sport in general in Switzerland doesn't enjoy the high reputation it has in other countries. Especially for 'marginalised' sports like diving and high diving, it is im-

possible to make a living from it. Nevertheless, we give everything we have to be world-class athletes. As I told you, I am pushing my professional career as well as the one in high diving.

in the business world. I personally study law, and with high diving, these are my main goals. I don't have specific idols in the sport but I admire athletes in any sport who are able to successfully combine both their professional and sporting careers. It is really important to me to have other goals in my life besides diving. I feel that it is important for your own inner balance to have other aspects to be happy about and also work for reaching the next goal.

Are you living in Switzerland? Are you also training in Switzerland?

I train and live in Zurich. It is nice, we have some high diving venues within a two-hour driving distance and we can go there in summer. But mostly, the training happens in the indoor training pool and in the gym. I like to be outside though...

How is your training routine?

Since I am working in a law firm and study at the University of Zurich, I have to be quite flexible. It is not easy to find slots for practice, but since I want to improve I just take the time and go to train. A training session always consists of a dryland part with some physical exercises and a part where we train and practise our dives in the water. Since we can't go high diving in winter, we split up our high dives in different parts like the take-off, rotations and twists, and entry. We practise these 'segments' separately from 3 to 10m before we put them together again in summer.

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What are your ambitions in this sport?

Personally, since I had some bad experiences with wanting too much when I was in springboard diving, I want to enjoy what I do and be happy for everything new I achieve. The process makes me happy and the work you put in. There is no special ambition but to enjoy all these beautiful moments together with the others, whether it is in practice or at competitions. Of course, I always will give my best.

"I feel ready for harder dives"

How would you define your present programme of dives? Lower DD, more safety; or high DD, more risk?

The past two years were a kind of introduction with less difficult dives – now comes the serious part

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and health systems. So, I had to tell myself regularly that there are people much more affected than we are here. Of course, I was really sad that all events and competitions were cancelled, but I hope now that the upcoming season gets better.

If the situation eventually gets better, what are your realistic plans for 2021?

I will do my best to come back in good shape and show the high diving world what I am capable of and do my new dives on the 27m platform. I hope that I can travel to many places and enjoy the time together with all the others.

“Olympics? They will not regret including us!”

If you had to defend the introduction of high diving in the Olympic Games, which arguments would you mention?

In my opinion, it is one of the most spectacular sports in the world. It combines so many aspects of other Olympic sports like diving, trampoline and gymnastics. It is one of a kind. Also, we are a growing sport and as I told you before we all work as a team even though it is an individual sport. This also shows a good picture of the Olympic spirit. They would definitely not regret including us...

Do you have any rituals, or a specific routine before a competition/dive?

I have my towel (shammy) which I need to dry myself. Without this, I really feel uncomfortable. Besides this, there is no specific ritual.

In general, how do you see the evolution of high diving in the years to come?

There are more and more athletes pushing the boundaries of the sport. In the last two decades, we were diving from rocks and remote places and had to build platforms on difficult spots. For many athletes, practice was quite hard. Now, new venues for high diving are opening and practice gets a lot easier, which pushes the sport even more. Also, sponsors were attracted by the sport and its intensity, so more and more events were happening. Sometimes, I feel everything is a bit in a rush, since it's a very recent sport, at least in its professional organisation. It is really dangerous and not only the athletes but also the organisers should be aware, when planning the event, that the health of the athletes is constantly at risk. But I hope this evolution and pushing the boundaries goes on. However, we will have to find a balance between pushing the sport and the safety of all the participating athletes. ■

If you start high diving, you have to think about the risk and it is not easy to get used to the heights. That is why most athletes go easy on the degree of difficulty in the beginning. I mostly did this in the last two years. Now I feel ready to go on and start to work on harder dives. Even so, I am aware of the danger and the difficulty and I am not acting rashly. It is one step at the time...

There is no special ambition but to enjoy all these beautiful moments together with the others, if it is in practice or at competitions.

The entire planet was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. How were your last months?

It was not easy. I was not able to follow my routines and my family has quite a lot of people in it who are especially at risk. So, I stood back and had to wait until it got better. Of course, in Switzerland, we have a high standard in terms of social security



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