

## Laval's Abel makes historic plunge

Forward 2 1/2 twisting somersault. Former Gazette amateur athlete of week raises the bar high for every female diver

BY ARPON BASU, FREELANCE    DECEMBER 4, 2009



"I broke the ice," Laval diver Jennifer Abel says after becoming the first woman to attempt a forward 2 1/2 somersault with two twists Thursday.

**Photograph by:** Pierre Obendrauf, The Gazette

Years from now it may simply be considered a tiny blip on the radar, as divers around the world continue pushing the boundaries of their sport.

But in the here and now, Laval's Jennifer Abel made diving history yesterday. And no one will ever be able to take that away from her.

The 18-year-old Olympian became the world's first woman to attempt a forward 2 1/2 somersault with two twists off the 3-metre springboard yesterday at the 12th annual CAMO Invitational.

Abel first did it in yesterday's preliminaries, and though she didn't quite nail it, a look of relief came over her face coming out of the pool as the weight of two months of preparation came cascading off her shoulders.

Giving her Olympic teammate Roseline Fillion a high-five, Abel sighed and said: "I broke the ice."

Moments later, Abel still couldn't fully appreciate what she had just accomplished, raising the bar for every female diver in the world.

"I don't think I realize it now and I don't think I'll realize it tomorrow either," said Abel, who was The Gazette's amateur athlete of the week in April 2005.

"I think it will only hit me when I get to the World Cups (in June) and the Chinese are there and all the best divers in the world are there. I'll fully realize it because I'll be the only one doing it."

The dive has become routine for men only in the last few years and requires a tremendous amount of power off the board to allow time to complete the two somersaults and two twists before straightening out for entry into the water.

Abel's first attempt yesterday lacked some of that power because she did not take off from the very edge of the board, costing her about one metre of height, and as a result she did not enter cleanly. The judges penalized her with scores ranging from 4.0 to 5.5 out of 10.

But that mattered little to Abel, because the ultimate goal is to have the dive polished and perfect in time for next summer's World Cup season and, beyond that, the 2012 Olympics in London.

"Our preparation for 2012 starts today," she said. "That's why I'm happy I did the dive today, because it tells me I'm on my way toward 2012."

The dive has a degree of difficulty of 3.4, and that number is multiplied by the judge's marks to determine a diver's total score. In the women's 3-metre final at the last Olympics, no diver had a degree of difficulty higher than 3.0.

Abel was first approached with the idea of adding this dive to her repertoire by former CAMO and national team head coach Michel Larouche. She tried it a few times last year, but decided to drop it as she wanted to concentrate on graduating from high school. She picked it up again in October, and unveiled it for the first time yesterday.

Now that she has, her coach Cesar Henderson feels it won't be long before the rest of the world follows.

"Every 10 years or so you see things moving, you see one or two divers doing new things," he said. "As soon as the other divers see that, they know that in order to compete they'll have to look for more degree of difficulty."

Henderson said he saw British diver Rebecca Gallantree practising a reverse 2 1/2 somersaults with 1 1/2 twists during the world championships in Rome last summer, a dive with a degree of difficulty of 3.5, or one-tenth higher than Abel's new dive. And it will only be a matter of time before the world's premier diving power starts churning out athletes who can do the same thing.

"You'll see the Chinese will be doing it very soon," Henderson said. "Not necessarily their two best divers right now, but the next generation will. They're just waiting for someone to do it in competition. And now someone has."

Of course, the same argument could apply to Abel as well, seeing as she is only 18 and most springboard divers don't peak until much later. But Abel and Henderson would rather take it a little slower and master this new dive before seeking new boundaries to knock down.

"I'm not even thinking about my goals for the Olympics right now," Abel said.

"Because if I made it from 10th in Canada to the Olympics in only a year, who knows what I'll be able to do in three years?"

That is precisely what makes Abel's history-making dive yesterday so tantalizing; it could just be the tip of the iceberg.

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