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Published on [fina.org](https://admin.fina.org) - Official FINA website (<https://admin.fina.org>)

Discovery worth more than Olympic gold for Canada's most decorated aquatic athlete

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It takes less than two seconds to complete a 3m springboard dive. Waiting for the score, though, can feel like an eternity. Especially for a diver like Jennifer Abel, who had been pursuing an individual medal for three Olympic Games. After she learned she had finished fourth in the individual event at the Rio 2016 Games, Abel needed a year to recover from the disappointment. As her Canadian team-mates hugged her after the competition, she fought back tears and the same disappointing feeling she had experienced a week earlier, when she and partner Pamela Ware finished less than a point away from the bronze medal in the 3m synchronised event.

She'd finished fourth twice – it's not possible to get any closer and still leave without a medal.

“Nobody deserves to finish fourth. I feel like fifth is better than fourth,” says now-retired Canadian diver Roseline Filion. “

For me as a friend and team-mate, seeing Jenn be so crushed by a performance was difficult.”



Abel (CAN) in Rio 2016 Olympic Games ©Getty Images

Abel is known for getting laughs from her team-mates with practical jokes, like making Filion fall in front of thousands of people as they walked into the Beijing 2008 Closing Ceremony. Her coach Arturo Miranda says she always brings a smile to training at the Olympic Park Sports Centre in Montreal, even in the cold Canadian winter.

She's also known for her hard work and dedication, but in 2017 she couldn't shake the feeling she'd done something wrong to finish fourth. She even thought about giving up diving, or at least dropping synchro and just focusing on her individual event.

“I'm not going to lie, it took me a year to come back to being myself again and being in love with diving,” says Abel, 29.

“I was always living in the past”

Eventually Miranda and Abel decided to try a new partnership for the 2017 season with Melissa Citrini-Beaulieu, a diver four years Abel's junior. She knew Abel from Montreal's powerhouse CAMO club, but Citrini-Beaulieu had never been to a FINA World Championships or Olympic Games. She had to follow in the footsteps of Ware, who claimed silver with Abel at the 2015 FINA World Championships, and Emilie Heymans, who paired with Abel for Olympic bronze in 2012. On top of that, Abel was not exactly at her peak of motivation. But Citrini-Beaulieu embraced the opportunity.

“I love what I do and I'm so passionate about it. Maybe she was losing it a little bit after the Games but it motivated her that

I was so motivated about the partnership and the new dives we had to do in synchro. I was so into it, I think it made her

” Citrini-Beaulieu says. “*We still figured out how to have fun through that rough patch.*”

Both Citrini-Beaulieu and Miranda call the partnership “*a perfect match*”. The pair had success early, winning gold at the

FINA Grand Prix in Rostock, Germany, in February 2017, bronze at the FINA World Series in Guangzhou, China, in March, and silver at the FINA Grand Prix on Canadian soil in Gatineau, Quebec, in April. Abel’s individual results were uneven: bronze in Rostock and the World Series in Kazan, Russia, in March, but also a pair of dreaded fourth-place finishes in China and 11th in Gatineau.



Abel with partner Citrini-Beaulieu in Gwangju 2019 ©Getty Images

Her former team-mate Fillion, now a sports journalist in Montreal, remembers watching from afar during that 2017 season. “

All the 2017 season I was looking at her face on the screen and I could tell she wasn't happy at all,” Fillion says.

Abel knew the disappointment she was carrying from Rio was weighing her down throughout 2017.

“Every time I was doing the last dive I performed in Rio, and I did it good, it was hard because I'd think, ‘If I'd done that in

Rio...’ I was always living in the past. I felt I was always living in Rio. Even if I had a good result or a good performance,

something was missing,” she says.

“I had to accept the fact that I was disappointed. It was really hard for me to accept.”

“We were sort of unstoppable”

Divers always deal with nerves but by the time Abel headed into the 2017 FINA World Championships in Budapest,

Hungary, that summer, she was *“petrified”*.

“I was scared to finish fourth again because everyone was still talking a year later about those fourth places,” she

says.

Somewhere during those world championships she found the turning point she needed. *“She was able to evolve and*

understand exactly what she needed to get better, to find new motivation and remind herself why she’s still diving,” Filion

says. *“Sometimes it takes a wrong turn to realise that you’re only a few steps away from doing it the best way you can.”*

Abel kept coming back to Rio in her mind. She had been first place after the preliminary round. She was in third heading into her final dive. She posted a solid 69.00 on that back 2-½ somersaults, better than she had done in the semi-final to advance in third. What had she done wrong?

She eventually came to realise the answer – nothing.

“I told myself that it was a disappointment, but actually it wasn’t,” she says. “I gave my all to this event and I didn’t miss

anything. I just didn’t have a major good dive and I just needed to accept that this time wasn’t mine. For months I thought it

was myself. I thought I didn’t do everything I could have.”

In Budapest it was her time, with Citrini-Beaulieu at her side. The synchro event was up first. The pair sat second all through the prelims and final, behind only Shi Tingmao and Chang Yani of China. The silver medal was the sixth of her career and put her in position to make Canadian history. Abel followed up with bronze in the individual, nailing that back 2-½ somersaults to finish. Then on the final day of the championships she teamed with Francois Imbeau-Dulac for bronze in the mixed synchro event. With eight medals, she had tied Alex Despatie and swimmer Ryan Cochrane for the most medals all-time by a Canadian at FINA World Championships.



Abel (CAN) with her bronze medal in FINA World Championships Gwangju 2019 ©Getty Images

“This is where I started to realise that my whole career is much more than being an Olympic medallist. Budapest really made me truly fall in love again with diving. Knowing that I had that title tied with those two wonderful men gave me another goal, and it was to be the most decorated Canadian when I went to Gwangju last summer,” Abel said.

At those 2019 Worlds, it was once again synchro silver for Abel and Citrini-Beaulieu, this time behind Shi and new partner Wang Han. Not only did Abel stand alone among Canadians with nine medals, but the pair qualified for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in the process.

“We were so happy and relieved because we knew we qualified our team for Tokyo, and at the same time I became the most

decorated (Canadian aquatic athlete). That title means a lot,” she says.

Abel went on to extend her career total to 10, teaming up with Imbeau-Dulac for another mixed synchro bronze in Gwangju. She continued the momentum into 2020. Her hometown of Montreal hosted the FINA World Series from February 28 to March 1, and Abel came away with three gold medals. Everything was shaping up for her to contend for a synchro medal again in Tokyo, as well as for an individual Olympic medal – the only piece of hardware that has eluded her in her career.

“Everything was perfectly placed. I knew exactly where I wanted to go, aiming to end the season with the Olympics,” she

says. “We were sort of unstoppable, willing to do every little extra to make it happen.”

“I learned so much about myself during these past four years”

Less than two weeks later, Canada began to shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pools closed for months, the Olympic Games were postponed and Abel – like all athletes – was left wondering if and when she’d be able to get in the water again, let alone compete for a medal.

“The hardest part was not knowing where to go or what to do, just waiting for news,” she says. “I’m the type of athlete who

likes to have a schedule in front of me.”

But after everything she’s been through, she may have been more mentally prepared than some to deal with delaying her dreams. From the 2018 season on, Filion has seen a different face on her friend and former team-mate. She’s been more confident, trying new things, analysing, asking questions and generally having more say in the details of her training plans.

The pandemic *“is a challenge but she’s so strong mentally, she can handle whatever comes her way,”* Filion says. “

Whatever happens, she’s good with herself. She’s good with the work she’s done.”

During the shutdown, Abel switched her focus to *“just trying to figure out life as a normal person”*.



Abel (CAN) at FINA Diving World Series 2019 in Japan ©Getty Images

That included things like helping her seven-year-old stepdaughter Lillyanna with her homework and taking time to enjoy preparing meals without feeling rushed. She and her boyfriend David Lemieux, a former IBF middleweight boxing champion, created a gym in their basement and worked out almost every day.

“It was fun to do some cardio with him, and also him doing some abs with me because we do a lot of abs in diving. I even

once tried to do boxing for fun, punching on his bag. It was fun to have an open mind. But I only did it once because after I

was sore,” Abel says. “It was fun having someone pushing himself, and it made me feel I had to push myself also.”

Abel kept in touch with Miranda, and team-mates like Citrini-Beaulieu, but not so much to talk about diving or training plans. As she has been doing over the past few years, she learned more about herself from the challenges presented by the pandemic.

“The only thing I could do best was learning about myself,” she says. That includes everything from what she actually likes

to do for workouts (*“I started diving when I was four, so I don’t know what it is to live without diving”*) to what an Olympic medal means to her.

She still wants one of course, but now she wants the one from Tokyo. She says she wouldn’t take a Rio medal now even if someone could turn back time and give it to her.

“If you asked me today, I wouldn’t change my position (from Rio),” she says.

“I wouldn’t take a medal because I learned so much about myself during these past four years. I think I am who I am today

Citrini-Beaulieu has similar feelings about not wanting to change the past. *“She was living a lot of disappointment (in 2017)*

and questioning and things like that,” Citrini-Beaulieu says. *“Our partnership started in this situation, but we grew up so*

much together. I was learning so much about her and so much about diving, I think I wouldn’t change starting in that

situation. Everybody goes through a rough patch. I think it just built our relationship the way it is right now, which is really

good.”

Abel would turn 30 shortly after the rescheduled Games, but she needs look no further than the woman who beat her in Rio for inspiration. At the London 2012 Games, Italian Tania Cagnotto also had the experience of finishing fourth in both her synchro and individual events. She came back and capped her career with individual bronze and synchro silver in Rio at age 31 – her fifth Olympics.

Abel and her team-mates returned to training in August, with health and safety protocols in place.

“Whenever the party is going to be on, we will be ready to dance,” Miranda says.

“We won’t look for any excuses or say we’re not ready or this or that.”

Abel’s dream of both a synchro and an individual medal in Tokyo remains the same. *“My desire, what I gained in the last*

few years, it’s not lost,” she says. *“It’s just postponed.”*

But there’s something she wants even more.

“Today I’m truly proud to say I know who I am with or without medals,” she says. “For sure this is my big goal, but what I

want the most, when I’m going to stand on the board at the Olympics, is I’m going to be proud of myself regardless of the

result.”
