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Alain Kohl (LUX) is not a fan of the “Comfort zone”

Pedro ADREGA, Editor-in-chief of FINA Aquatics World Magazine

At 36, Alain Kohl has been a regular presence in FINA High Diving events since 2016. A former 3m springboard diver, Alain comes from Luxembourg, a tiny country not so used to shining in aquatic sports. Despite this lack of tradition, he remains motivated and obtained in 2018, at the FINA High Diving World Cup in Abu Dhabi, his best ranking so far: 13th place. Two years before, also in the UAE capital, he had been 14th, then 18th in 2017 and finally 17th in his sole participation so far in a FINA World Championships, the 2017 edition in Budapest (HUN).

This relatively late arrival to the high diving world scene comes after a consolidated career in pool diving. A traditional pathway, but a difficult transition from a 3m springboard to a 27m platform! Alain Kohl recalls:

“I started diving when I was six, I did regular diving competitions for about 20 years. My first high dive was at 18. I did high diving only once or twice a year as 3m diving was still my priority. When I finished my career in 2005, I decided to focus on cliff diving. The transition was quite hard for me. On 3m you are flying, but you don’t feel so much the gravity pulling you down. In high diving you are really falling, I had to learn how to deal with this new feeling in the air. Even now, after many years of high diving, I see that former 10m platform divers have fewer problems with this transition than 3m springboard athletes.”

A kind reminder to all those wondering how a pool diver is capable of moving to a new level (and height): the transition is made step by step, always ensuring that a given height is consolidated and then moving on to the next one.

With more time in the air to perform, Alain had also to adapt his 3m programme to a platform that is nine times higher. More somersaults and twists are possible within the 3.5 seconds of flight.

“My favourite dive is my triple front pike with 2 ½ twists (5165B – DD 4.3) and I think it’s also my best dive if I have a good day. However, I still have plans for new dives,” he says.

Alain performed this combination last November in Abu Dhabi, obtaining 88.15 points from the judges.



“There are never perfect conditions”

Kohl also reflects on the necessary balance between extremely complicated dives that may not be correctly executed vs the possibility of lowering the degree of difficulty, favouring a safer and well-performed dive.

“You have to find the right mix. A hard dive sounds good in theory and in perfect conditions, but the conditions are never perfect... There is wind, cold weather, cold water, the stress of competing at the World Championships...” he says.

In 2017, in Budapest, stress may have been in fact present during his three-dive presentation: Alain started his programme with a 5441B (DD 2.8), the easiest of his combinations, and got a very acceptable 67.20 from the judges. Things got more challenging on rounds 2 and 3: his pet dive, the 5165B, came next with a (weak) 64.50 total, while a 5163B (a twist less than the precedent, for a DD 3.6) was better but also far from flawless (75.60). Reflecting on the location of the high diving venue in Budapest (the tower was installed opposite the imposing Parliament building), Alain is not ready to forget the Magyar rendezvous:

“Budapest was amazing, the set-up of this pool in this place.” On other favourite diving spots: “Polignano a Mare in Italy is beautiful. Every spot has its own beauty.”

“My brain tells me not to jump”

When asked if his serenity and calm while competing are only apparent, Alain Kohl is emphatic:

“I look calm? Inside I’m definitely not calm! My brain tells me not to jump.... My experience tells me that I know what I have to do in the air. In this case, every diver has to find the right mix. If you are too nervous, you are not in control; if you are too relaxed you are not alert enough.”

Once more, a delicate balance is needed between physics (the height of the platform and the many things that can go wrong during the dive) and the reliability of the training (and the repetition of the same movements).

On this particular point, Alain Kohl (1.68m/5ft 6ins, 70kg/154 pounds) also recalls that preparation in high diving is difficult, as it is complicated to find the right infrastructures to always dive from the 27m platform.

“Most of my training happens in the fitness and at the pool. Your body has to be ready for the impact. On a competition weekend, I’m probably one of the guys that does more dives during the training sessions. I need the preparation to be ready and to understand that I’m able to take it,” he says.

Given the few opportunities to compete at the world level, many high divers earn their living by displaying their skilful performances on ship cruises or acrobatic shows around the world. Alain complements his high diving talent with all sorts of sports training.

“I was a professional cliff diver for a couple of years. Meanwhile I am a diving coach, athletics coach for all kinds of sports and a personal trainer. So all requests are welcome,” he laughs.

Moreover, at national level, Alain is not alone: both his national federation and some commercial partners recognise his effort by providing valuable assistance:

“The Luxembourg Swimming Federation supports me as much as they can and I am very thankful for that. I have some sponsors that are with me as well. All in all I am happy with the support I get.”

His choice for high diving left those around him a bit nervous, taking into account the risks associated with this discipline.

However, Alain explains, the external vision of an “*extreme*” and “*dangerous*” sport is compensated by the preparation and

self-awareness of the high divers. Like many others, Kohl prefers to speak of a “*calculated risk*”.

“At the beginning, my mum was very sceptical but now they see how much I train and how seriously I do this. Most of my friends think that it is a pretty crazy and cool sport. Sometimes I try to explain to them, it is far from crazy, everything I do is 100% calculated.” When asked if, in normal life, he is a risk-taker, Alain smiles: “Yes, I’m not always fan of being in the comfort zone...”



“I will not push until I break apart”

Being a quite small “family”, the high diving world has nevertheless a handful of recognisable faces. By their longevity in the sport, by their charisma, or by their impeccable technique, they are somehow the pillars of a sport that entered into the FINA sphere in 2013.

“Idols? Orlando [Duque, from Colombia] for his incredible strong mind and Gary [Hunt, Great Britain] for his technique and mind. It is important not to copy anybody, you have to find what suits you. In life I have many idols, and I try to look for qualities that could bring me further in my own life,” Alain declares. But besides high diving, he follows other aquatic sports, “when there is available time”. And surprisingly, comes a revelation: “I train next to water polo at my pool; I have big respect for this sport as it looks really harsh.”

On the sport he loves, Alain strongly believes that high diving has all the potential to be an Olympic discipline in the short/medium term.

“The sport is growing every year, it’s crazy. In my eyes, the questions is not ‘if’ high diving will be at the Olympics but ‘when’. I hope it will be included quite soon, so maybe I can manage to go as an athlete.”

At 37 next August, the question of retirement is an unavoidable theme. Orlando Duque, his idol, is 44 and still competing, but sooner or later the body will no longer stand the violence of the impact in the water, nor the demanding training to be always ready.

“In 2018, I had a difficult season. My season started and I wasn’t ready... I didn’t have the time to properly train. For the World Cup in November I was OK. My result was good and I didn’t feel anything after the weekend. That tells me my training is still working and my body is still strong enough. Anyway, I will not push until I break apart; when my body or my mind tells me to stop, I will end my career. From that point on I would love to stay in the sport, as high diving is my life. I would like to help the sport to grow and support new athletes,” he says.
