

Why the best high divers are actually afraid

By Jolene Latimer

It's not always a good idea to conquer your fears. If you ask most male high divers — whose lives are spent jumping from platforms as high as 27 meters, almost 90 feet — they'll tell you they get scared with every dive.

The emerging sport, which is making its third appearance at the FINA World Championships is — to sum it up — extreme.

It puts such a severe strain on the athletes' bodies that they can only withstand about four or five jumps a day.

All that height does make for a nice view. In fact, the Budapest organizing committee has built into the event a breathtaking backdrop for high dive: the Hungarian parliament building.



But that merely augments the obvious: these people are jumping from very high up there.

So, yes, they're scared. But they like it that way.

"The adrenaline gives you extra power, extra force," said Gary Hunt, 33, reigning world champion who finished first in Friday afternoon's preliminary rounds.

To train, high divers practice their dives in segments and spend time visualizing each dive as a whole so they can minimize the amount of time it takes to get a full jump perfected. One wrong step could mean serious

injury or death.

As if to underscore this point, scuba divers can be seen waiting at the edges of the pool in case anything should go amiss when the athlete hits the water.

Most athletes quickly flash the “OK” sign with their hands when they come up for air — just to make sure there’s no panic. Hunt, who was raised in the U.K., has been high diving for more than 10 years — a career that started in Budapest as a result of the 2006 European Aquatics Championships, where he was a pool diver.



"I could see the rise of Tom Daley and Jack Law, and it seemed obvious that they were going to be the new divers," said Hunt.

So he decided to do something different, something he liked more, anyway. In Budapest he had received an invitation to train as a high diver and perform at a show in Italy. He said yes to that opportunity and never looked back. In a way, it was the sport he had been training for his whole life.

"I was always known as the kid who wanted to learn the crazy dives or the stupid dives," said Hunt.

"They were the dives the coaches wouldn't teach. I had a list of dives and I wanted to tick off every one that I could do."

Now Hunt is back in Budapest, this time looking to advance the progression of his sport — not just by creating new dives but by becoming the sport's first two-time world champion.

"It's great seeing the sport grow and having an influence in it as well," said Hunt.

But that doesn't mean he's not afraid. In fact, it's very scary being at the top of the high dive platform, and he's not the only athlete who thinks so. Anna Bader of Germany, who placed first in Friday's women's prelims – the women dive from a platform 20 meters, about 66 feet, high – attests to feeling the fear as well.

"*We are always a little bit scared,*" said Bader, whose partner, Kris Kolanus, is competing for Poland as a

high diver this week. They are new parents to a 10-month-old baby girl.

"*We have a lot of respect for the height.*" But as Bader puts it, that healthy respect is their "*best protection.*" It makes them focus. "*You need,*" Hunt said, "*to use the fear.*"
