

## Abu Dhabi: Successful transitions

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Three out of the six medallists of the fifth edition of the FINA High Diving World Cup, staged in Abu Dhabi (UAE) on November 9-10, 2018 were former pool divers – with more or less success -, but who have recently decided to compete on higher boards. For Constantin Popovici (ROU, silver among men), Oleksiy Prygorov (UKR, bronze), and Ellie (Eleanor) Smart (USA, third among women), the UAE rendezvous represents a new start in the respective careers, as it brought their first medal in a FINA high diving event.

At 30, Popovici was a well-known pool diver until 2011. The last relevant result in a FINA competition dates back to 2010, when he was sixth in the 10m platform final of the Veracruz (MEX) leg of the Diving World Series. Before that, in 2009, at the FINA World Championships in Rome (ITA), he was eighth in his pet event, largely improving his 23<sup>rd</sup> place at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing (CHN). Finally, in 2007, he was only 26<sup>th</sup> in the 10m at the FINA Worlds in Melbourne (AUS).

Given this trajectory, the Romanian athlete decides in 2011 to retire from the competition. Until the beginning of 2018, when he entered in the high diving world. He recalls this transition: “After my retirement, I start doing acrobatic shows, performing in cruise boats and I even worked in Las Vegas with the Cirque du Soleil. That was my beginning in high diving. In a progressive way, I start getting interested in the competition and in 2018 I made my entry in this world, mainly because I wanted a change in my life. Abu Dhabi is my fifth event of the season, after three Red Bull legs and one competition in Italy”.



Constantin Popovici (ROU)

Asked about his ambitions for this World Cup, he confesses: “I was secretly hoping for a medal, but it was hard to think about it. I know my technique is good, because I am actually returning also to pool diving. This helps me a lot. In 2019, I hope to compete in parallel in pool and high diving – I think it will be good for me”.

After a six-month stay in Italy, Popovici will return to Romania, when he trains in the city of Sibiu, as in Bucharest “there isn’t a suitable swimming pool”. For 2019, the qualification for the FINA Worlds in Korea is guaranteed, but Popovici aims higher: “I also want to be in Tokyo 2020, competing in pool diving! I will train hard to get there and I hope I can successfully conciliate pool diving and high diving”.

Competing in 3m springboard in his past life as diver, Oleksiy Prygorov became in UAE the only medallist in high diving with an Olympic medal in the pool variant: in 2008, in Beijing, the Ukrainian star was third in the 3m event, a performance he never replicated in the following years. At the 2013 Worlds, his last FINA event in the pool, he was seventh in the springboard and after that his first new entry in a FINA competition happened in 2017, at both the High Diving World Cup in Abu Dhabi (17<sup>th</sup>) and the World Championships in Budapest (11<sup>th</sup> from the 27m-platform).



Oleksiy Prygorov (UKR)

Among women, Ellie Smart was a perfect unknown athlete in the FINA world until this World Cup in Abu Dhabi. At 23, she had a modest career in the past as pool diver, and opted to literally try a new height in her career.

“It’s my first FINA event, I am new girl here! I watched the past two High Diving World Cups and I just dreamt of also being here. To finally get a medal, to qualify for the World Championships and to be invited to the Red Bull circuit, it’s a fantastic experience”, she confesses. “I made the transition almost two years ago. I was a 10m diver, then quit for two years. In the meantime, I did a Masters in Sports and Exercise Science with focus on Human Performance and I am a graduate assistant coach at the University of Minnesota”, Smart explains.

“I have always dreamt to compete and represent my country since I was a child. I was never that good in 10m and when I heard about High Diving, and could taste that dream, I couldn’t let this opportunity escape!” she recalls. “I have long days back at home: I go to the pool, I coach for four hours and then I train three hours”.

On her tactics for the bronze in Abu Dhabi, she elaborated: “Today, I focused on feeling the elements – the wind, the water. I was also very proud to represent my country, which doesn’t happen very often. This discipline is developing quickly. It will take the same way as diving did and I am very happy to be part of the generation that built it up”.

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