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Yumi Adachi (JPN): "I want to foster swimmers who can go beyond what I have achieved"

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Yumi Adachi and her partner Atsushi Abe made history for Japan last year when they captured the nation's first-

ever mixed-duet medals in a FINA World Championships. The pair, who claimed a fifth and a seventh place when

mixed duets were introduced at the 2015 World Championships in Kazan (RUS), moved up to fourth in both the free

and technical programmes in 2017 and capped that with a brace of bronze medals each at the 2019 edition in

Adachi, now 31, has vast experience in the sport. She competed in the team event at the 2012 London Olympics and

in the 2009, 2011 and 2013 World Championships. She retired in 2013 but returned when mixed duets were

introduced for the Worlds and is now coaching. A skilful and expressive performer, she talked to our magazine

about her life in artistic swimming.

What made you start artistic swimming?

At the age of three I began swimming at the swimming club in my hometown of Saitama. My mother seemed to want her daughters to be able to swim because she couldn't swim herself. When I was seven I learned that there was a day when I could attend artistic swimming practice in the club. I shared this information at home and I told my parents that I wanted to take part in the synchro lessons. Even though I wasn't doing anything special, my body was supple and I could do side splits from my childhood. Hence, my parents thought that their daughter had an aptitude for this sport. They let me participate in the experience session. I really enjoyed that day, so I switched from swimming to artistic swimming.

What was so much fun about it?

I was amazed that in artistic swimming you could do so many things in time with the music in the water. The competition of swimming is just swimming in the pool. But synchro expresses various things while dancing, jumping out and turning in the water. That was a very amazing event for me. So I quit swimming and switched to a class to do synchro.

What were your first impressions?

It was great fun! At first, I was happy to be able to try a lot of different techniques, to be able to do it, and to try new skills again and again. It was really fun and a very happy time.

Did you watch and study artistic swimming on TV?

I didn't watch much during my childhood. But when I was about 13 or 14 years old I admired a (synchro) swimmer named Takako Konishi. At the time she was a top athlete who performed solo in the junior national team. It was amazing to me then that she was a high school student and could perform so wonderfully. I really admired her, so I watched Konishi's routines. Now, I can watch the performances of various swimmers on the web, but when I was a junior high school student, there was no such thing, so I watched videotapes many times.



Did you ever compete with Konishi?

Yes, when I was 19. I still remember it clearly. It was the solo event at the 2008 Japan Nationals. At that time the total score of the technical and free routine determined the rankings. The first place went to Saho Harada, who was a medallist at the 2004 and 2008 Olympics. I was fighting with Konishi-san for the second place. Depending on the result of the free routine, it would be decided whether I could beat or lose to Konishi. That was the first-ever national championship for me...I was extremely nervous and wept before performing. I was so scared that I didn't want to swim. But it is very difficult to swim if you are crying, so I told myself: "I have to stop crying, I have to stop crying." Maybe thanks to that, for the first time, I entered my own world, which means 'my zone'. I was able to forget all the pain and tension and concentrate on acting. As a result, I earned the second place by defeating Konishi, whom I worshipped, and I got my first solo medal. Of course I was delighted because I had won ahead of the person I admired so much. At the same time I felt sad too. Still, I was able to finish my performance properly even though I was nervous enough to cry before swimming, and I gained a kind of victory. That was a turning point in my career in synchro.

Why did you feel happy as well as sad when you beat the person you admired so much?

It might have felt lonely that the admiration was gone. If I had gone beyond what I was chasing, I might have been worried about what kind of swimmer I should be and what kind of performing I should do. I still don't know clearly. However, there was an admiration of Konishi, and fighting for the medals with Konishi was a very big event for me.

I think that we had a strong impression about you as the soloist, but did you have the desire to be the soloist

Not really. I was able to participate in national competitions in Japan from an early age. But for solo, I just entered the national competition for the first time in 2008. I didn't eye the medals, they seemed to be out of reach, so I didn't think about becoming a soloist. I started practising solo in high school. At the age of 17 I met a coach, Masami Hanamure, who would teach me many things in the long run. When Masami started to build me as a soloist, I recognised that was such an interesting event. My world of solo spread at a stretch and that new world was shown by Masami. It's no exaggeration to say that Masami taught me that I was able to swim solo.

What is so appealing in solo?

In the end it's a fight with myself. Duet and team offer fun and a sense of accomplishment that we can build something with team-mates. In solo, when my condition is either good or bad, it shows all myself in the results. We can express everything we want to do straight through acting. I think that is the solo appeal.

Just like Konishi, you are also a short swimmer (1.59cm/5ft 2-1/2ins). What do you think about this?

Of course, I have lamented my height. I was often nervous because many people told me that I was small. However, I was able to do a lot of things just because of this body. There are the flexibility and lifts I could do. So, instead of lamenting my height, I acted thinking, "I'll do what I can do with this body." There are many small synchro swimmers in Japan. Sure, they will have a lot of trouble. But the experience of working seriously and not giving up at any time will bring meaning not only to artistic swimming but also to life in the future. It is the same for me. Don't give up artistic swimming, there are things we can do with this body, and there are things only we can do with this body. I learned a lot from thinking and working that way, and it is also useful for coaching the athletes who are building their careers now.

One year after victory over Konishi, you were selected for the Japan national team in 2009. Soon you led the team as

the soloist and as a central figure in Japan. After the 2012 London Olympics, you retired in 2013. However, in 2015

you returned when the mixed duet made its debut at the World Championships. Why did that event attract you so

The reason is that I was simply interested in what a male and female artistic swimmer could do together, so I wanted to experience the mixed duet. Since I had retired for only two years, I felt that my body could still bear the loads, and the other main reason was that my respected teacher Masami invited me back. In addition, I wanted to be one of the first in the event, the first Japanese representative. That's why I decided to come back.



How did you feel when you actually tried it?

After all, artistic swimming is the same, so what you do is the same for mixed, solo, duet, and team. However, I felt that what I could express in this event was completely different from artistic swimming performed only by women. I think that the expressiveness of my partner Atsushi Abe was wonderful. I felt that mixed duet would be different from the artistic swimming I had seen so far. Also, considering the artistic aspect, I think mixed duet has the greatest potential in the future. Just because men and women are there, the range of expression expands infinitely. That's why I think there are many themes that mixed duet can express the best.

You and Atsushi have been a pair for a total of four years. How did you feel about him?

At first he didn't have much of an opinion, as he was jumping into the world of artistic swimming, about which he knew nothing. However, when we participated in the World Championships in 2017, Abe gave me a lot of suggestions. For example, "Let's do this here", "Isn't this acting better?". He has given a lot of feedback on how to improve our performance. From that point on, I gradually felt like we were creating the performance and action together. When we were able to get the World Championship medal in 2019, we were really happy. I had thought before that he was unreliable. However, since I have been with Abe I have been able to raise the level of mixed duet in Japan so far, and I would not have won the medal unless I had paired with Abe. So, for me, Abe is the one and only important partner.

I heard that you are coaching artistic swimming now.

Yes, I'm working at the university where I was enrolled, I teach junior swimmers as well as college students. Currently, a male swimmer, the junior national team representative of Japan's mixed duet, is also learning there. Actually, I have been coaching since 2015. There was a balance between my own practising and coaching the swimmers, which was very hard, sometimes I felt I was worn out. But, looking back, it was a very good experience, I think. Artistic swimming can be expressed infinitely in the water. That means there are endless things to do in the water and you may think that there are endless things swimmers have to do. Instead, there are endless things that can be expressed – that's what I've learned from coaching.

Finally, can you sum up how artistic swimming has influenced you, shaped your life?

I ended up winning medals at the World Championships and swimming solo at the World Championships, so I may seem like a fortunate swimmer. But I had a lot of hardships in the process, and I was able to acquire a strong mental strength. I will not be nervous anymore in tense situations. There were so many people who supported me because I swam seriously. Looking back, I think I am living a very blessed life. I was able to do not only the mixed duet but also what I could contribute to the success of the Japanese national team because I was myself, and I think there were some things I could leave behind. Especially in the mixed duet, it is my pride that we were able to achieve some of Japan's historic results at the 2019 World Championships. And I want to foster swimmers who can go beyond what I have achieved. Artistic swimming is evolving at a very fast speed now. I want to work hard to stay abreast of that evolution, and I want to be a person who can create new things and continue to express new things.



