Paola Espinosa (MEX): “We are athletes, we will overcome this”

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Coincidences are mostly strange, and unexplainable. This one remains bizarre, but has an explanation. We are in the middle of the afternoon, on July 18, 2019, in Gwangju, Republic of Korea. Two days earlier, Paola Espinosa claims the bronze medal in the women’s 3m synchro event, thus securing her first major success after her comeback to competition. Almost two years earlier, she had a child - daughter Ivana - and decided to take a break. On that July
plans for the Tokyo Olympic Games, her new family situation. Married to another top Mexican diver – Ivan Garcia

– the conclusion of our nice talk touched on how they both missed their daughter, who stayed at home while Paola

and her partner were competing in Korea.

Nine months later, at the end of April 2020, with most of the world confined at home because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we find Paola Espinosa in her home, enjoying more than ever the company of her daughter. In July 2019, mother and child on two different sides of the planet, now playing, training and listening to music together in their own four walls in Mexico. All day long, forced by the circumstances of the lockdown. But Espinosa is happy with the situation, she likes to take a positive approach to a challenging situation. At nearly 34 she has known many ups and some downs in her career. She is used to rebounding, and coronavirus will not lower her morale.
A story of success

She is still 14 when she takes part in her first FINA World Championships, in 2001 in Fukuoka (JPN). She is sixth in the 3m synchro. Two years later, we find her in Barcelona (ESP), where she moves up to bronze in the 3m synchro with partner Laura Sanchez. She is also sixth in the 10m synchro 17th in the individual 3m and 32nd in the individual 10m. Come 2004 and her first Olympics, in Athens, and she once again competes in all four events, her best placings fifth in both the 3m and 10m synchro finals. At the 2005 FINA Worlds in Montreal, she just misses the podium, finishing fourth in the 3m synchro, and at the 2007 Melbourne Worlds she can manage no higher than seventh (individual platform and both synchro finals). However, triple gold followed a few months later at the Pan-American Games in Rio de Janeiro (individual 3m and 10m, and 3m synchro).

By now already a star in Mexico, she is chosen as the country’s flagbearer at the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. That honour certainly worked as an additional motivation: Espinosa and Tatiana Ortiz become the first-ever female Mexican divers to gain Olympic medals, securing bronze in the 10m synchronised final. In the 10m individual event, Espinosa finishes fourth.

But the best was still to come, in 2009. In Rome, in the outdoor facility of the Foro Italico, she achieves the best result so far in her long and successful career, the world title in the 10m platform, leaving favourite Chen Ruolin with the silver and receiving the gold on the podium from compatriot Jesus Mena, the 1988 Olympic bronze medallist.

Espinosa is a bronze medallist at the Shanghai 2011 Worlds in the individual 10m and wins her second Olympic medal (silver) in London 2012 in the 10m synchro (with Alejandra Orozco). But she fails to make the podium at both the 2013 and 2015 World Championships and also misses out at the Rio 2016 Olympics, finishing fourth in the individual platform.

Then, comes the break and the birth of her daughter in 2017. She comes back on time to qualify and compete at the
Gwangju 2019 World Championships, but only on the 3m board, claiming her bronze in the synchro event. Olympic qualification is up to Mexico’s National Olympic Committee but Espinosa hopes to obtain her ticket for the Tokyo Games, now scheduled for the summer of 2021.

This is our interview with Espinosa in Gwangju.

I was very afraid of water

What Paola do we have in 2019, when compared with previous years? What still motivates you?

Besides being an elite athlete, my situation has significantly evolved: I am also a mother. A very happy mother, with clear goals: I want to go to my fifth Olympic Games. Not just to take part, but to go there well prepared. I want to fight for a medal. So, I am a more mature Paola, in all senses, a happier Paola, who has nothing to lose or prove. Everything good that will come is a bonus. I keep diving because I like it. I have also an additional responsibility towards my daughter – I want to teach her the same values that sport brought me.
What were those values? What has diving brought into your life?

There were a lot of nice rewards and medals, but most important were the values, the same values I had at home but I could develop through sport – the bravery to face any challenging situation without fear, the passion for what you are doing and for what life is bringing you, the love for the other people, but also being responsible, being organised and intelligent. This was the most important thing. Besides the medals, it’s to know that when you work, when you make an effort, sooner or later things will happen the way you dreamt of.

How did it all start?

It started because they could not stand me at home! I was a very active – I would say hyperactive – child (I have an older sister, always very quiet), so my mother kept saying: ‘What to do with this girl?’ Doctors wanted to give me medicines, but my father, who was a former swimmer, opted to take me to a gym. I did a lot of sports – swimming, taekwondo, karate, gymnastics, but the only one I liked was diving…

But how exactly diving?

In fact, I was very afraid of water. I could barely touch it. As my father was a swimmer, it was inconceivable for him that I could not swim. At six, I already knew how to swim and I started seeing the diving boards – they invited me to join the group. I liked the sensation of being afraid, surpassing that fear and doing things that the other kids couldn’t do.

If we look at your results, we see that you are successful in both 3m and 10m. This is not usual nowadays…
In the beginning, I just wanted 3m, but my morphology and physical characteristics were perhaps more fitted for 10m. Before, you could find athletes doing 3m and 10m, but now everyone is getting specialised in one or the other. At a certain moment, I got into 10m, and I got good results. But I was also quite consistent in the 3m, which for me was an easy one. When you dive from 10m, you are a bit afraid, you get hurt, with constant pain, so 3m looks easy… The springboard is much more relaxing – you don’t have that constant fear of hitting the platform or failing the entry and getting hurt. Today, I prefer the springboard because I want an ‘easier’ life. I am a mother, I need to be healthy, but the truth is that nothing is comparable with the adrenaline you feel when diving from a 10m platform.

Mental strength is essential

What memories do you keep from your 2009 world title in Rome?

A lot of happiness and nostalgia. It was a complicated year for me: I had chicken pox in China and had to be in quarantine. At those Championships, I understood that the medals are won not only with the eight-hour effort you provide every day in training, but also thanks to your mental strength. When your mind is fully determined and in good spirit, you can do wonders and even overcome any eventual training limitation you might have had. This is what happened in Rome: I understood that whatever I had done before, it had been worth it. I wasn’t aware of the importance of this medal immediately. However, when I came back to Mexico I realised that I was the best diver in the world in the 10m platform… What a sensation it was!
Does it make sense to compare that gold with your two Olympic medals?

Each medal has its own history and context. Each brings a different and happy memory. When you have an Olympic medal, you enter into the history of your sport. Especially in Mexico, where Olympic medals are not abundant, this kind of success is an enormous feat. I value these medals a lot, but the gold at the World Championships remains perhaps my fondest and happiest moment.

You come from a country with a solid tradition in diving…

I was the first female diver in my country with an Olympic medal. Several male divers had had this honour of getting an Olympic medal for Mexico in diving, but I was the first woman to achieve it. This is of course a pride and an honour for me. I am always very happy to represent my country, Mexico. And I believe that with my example, female divers got more visibility and support in the country.
To what extent have those medals changed your life?

I got more support, and the people see you differently, they trust you – they know that if you are competing in a world competition you can expect to get a medal. But the most important thing is that, in my heart, it proves that whatever I want to do, I can actually do it. You have to work a lot for it, but everything is possible. Getting a medal in Mexico means that all spotlights are turned on you after this immense success.

You must be better than Paola!

And you naturally become a model for the youth, for the children trying to get into this discipline…

I wouldn’t like to be a coach, that is very clear. But I would like to remain connected to the sport. To bring back to diving what diving has brought to me. I am glad to see that some years ago, only three or four girls at national level were performing from the 10m and that now, a bit thanks to me, many more are diving from the platform. Many say, ‘I want to be like Paola Espinosa’, and I keep telling them, ‘No, you must be much better than Paola Espinosa’. I give a lot of advice, I try to help as much as I can the new generation. But I want them also to see that I continue fighting myself to reach my goals, that I remain deeply involved and focused on the competition. This is what counts: that having some status like me, you can leave a gram of inspiration in every kid you speak to.
Tell us about your ‘new’ life: you are married to a diver, Ivan Garcia, and you now have a daughter. How does this fit into your preparation?

I have a daughter, almost two years old. I am in a stage of my life where I am extremely happy. I feel that I finally got the highest possible success in my life! Since the birth of my daughter, I feel that I completed something that was missing – I had medals, I trained a lot, I competed, I travelled, but now I am a wife, I am a mother. I got into a new dimension! I had my baby after a very challenging pregnancy, I gained 14 extra kilos – I thought I could never recover. But after 40 days, I moved to another city, I changed coach and I changed my training group. I started from scratch. You may have a lot of experience, but the physical shape is never acquired. I worked a lot and I deeply thank to my new coach, Ivan Bautista. I am training in Guadalajara. I live there with my new team and I feel very happy there. The birth of my daughter Ivana was perhaps the springboard that was missing in my life to re-start a new phase in my career. Sometimes, when you get to the top, you need to come down and feel again as a simple human being who needs to rework everything back, in a consistent way.

And then you arrive in Gwangju and managed to get a medal.

I came to Gwangju very motivated to do my best and to get good results. Getting a medal there fills me with happiness and a big smile. Moreover, the event where we got a medal was kind of ‘unseen’ in Mexico since 2004. So, I am really thrilled. I am back and it’s good to know that it represents the result of all the work I undertook after the birth of my daughter. The goal remains going to the Olympics and fighting for a medal. This medal is not only a guarantee of being present at the Olympics – it is also what motivates me and allows me to dream of an Olympic medal.
…with your status, you feel that pressure to have a medal…

I don’t feel I HAVE to win a medal, I WANT to win a medal. I’ve felt like this all my life. I have been able to differentiate those two words very well over the years. I know that people want that, and sometimes comments are quite bad, but I had less favourable moments in my career and I could survive. This is sport.

Evolution in diving is amazing
Precisely on this, how do you see the recent evolution of diving? More nations are getting good athletes and this is of course a positive sign.

The change has been amazing. The truth is that the level of the athletes has risen a lot in the world and one of the secrets for that was the specialisation we talked about before. The scores of today are scores that I couldn’t have imagined possible just four years ago. China remains perhaps the strongest nation, but many other countries are competing quite strongly. We are also obliging Chinese divers to raise their level. There are certainly Chinese divers executing dives with marks of 10, but there are many Mexican divers performing combinations that no one else is capable of doing… Diving is in my opinion one of the sports that is evolving more and faster. There is never a boring competition in diving. You never know what will happen and what will be the final outcome.

Talking about evolution, how do you see high diving?

I never thought of doing this now or in the future! It’s curious to see that some of the Mexican divers involved in this discipline were not so good in pool diving, they were even a bit afraid of the 10m and now they are diving from 27m. How come? But it is certainly a spectacular sport, with a lot of show. I hope it can be in the Olympic programme, as there are a lot of good Mexicans there… But nothing compares with pool diving!

What is your normal routine at home, now with one child, and both of you competing at the highest level? And now, how do you manage being here, in Gwangju, so far away from your daughter?
Our normal day is: get up, breakfast, wait for Ivana to wake up, take her to the school, go training, picking her up, eat lunch together, she goes for a sleep, we go to train again, we come, we play together, we eat dinner, she goes to sleep and next day is the same. Now, she is far away, we miss her a lot, she also misses us a lot, but we hope that she will be able to see us in Tokyo, performing well and hopefully getting a medal. We do a lot of work now, but we hope it will be fruitful in the future.

The joy of my daughter gives me strength

And the interview was over in Gwangju. On that optimistic (yet nostalgic) note.

Months have gone by and everything seemed in order for another successful year, marked by the Olympic celebration in Tokyo in July. But the dissemination of the coronavirus on an unprecedented scale around the planet caused an exceptional disruption to everyone’s lives. Social interaction and, of course, sporting activities were deeply affected by the pandemic and the Games had to be postponed for the first time in history. More than half of the world’s population was confined to home and, at the time of writing, it is still uncertain when a kind of “normality” will be back, despite some positive signs concerning the evolution of the virus.

In Mexico, Paola Espinosa, like all other elite athletes around the world, is basically at home, the venues and training facilities having being closed by most of the national authorities on a global scale. But she keeps her smile, and her motivation seems unaltered.

In the last days of April, we spoke again with the Mexican champion.

**Retrospectively, since our last interview, what did Gwangju 2019 represent for you?**

A very emotive moment, after my return to competition from a long break. It was the moment of confidence I needed at this stage of my career – to be at the top of the world diving hierarchy. My heart and mind were again filled with hope. I am quite proud of being able to take my country to the Olympics in the synchro 3m springboard. It was also a new chapter in my life – I had changed coach, I had my husband, my daughter, a new diving partner… A lot of enthusiasm and a group of people that supports and helps me a lot. It has become one of my favourite medals!

**And now, nine months later, how are you dealing with this challenging time, namely the confinement at home?**

It’s definitely a difficult period. But being all this time at home, it’s quite a beautiful thing for me because I am trying to keep fit and ensure my physical shape, and I am doing that at the same time as I am taking advantage of being all the time with my daughter. Training with my daughter by my side, playing, trying to imitate what I am doing brings me a lot of happiness and smiles all day long. I get emotional. These are definitely the most different sets of training I’ve had since the beginning of my career. I am doing it with an additional focus: to enjoy the company of my daughter. Doing things together.
Change a bit the rigid training rhythm I was used to. Change the music, not the one I like, but the one Ivana likes… I also teach her new and different things, and she really enjoys doing some exercises with her mom. So, despite the difficult of the moment, this is a nice ‘food’ for my heart. I feel lucky, I feel happy to be at home and be healthy. I also try to do manual things, to cook a lot with my daughter, we try to do different things, exploring the creativity of the child and, in my case, to be ‘back’ in a home environment. I was so focused on training, competing, travelling. I am now enjoying doing things of ‘woman’, ‘mother’, ‘family member’. The joy of my daughter is what gives me strength and energy to overcome these challenging times.

How did you react to the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics to 2021?

That was hard to accept. A hard thing, as it brings uncertainty. It completely changed my life structure, as athlete, as woman, as mother. I was very much used to having plans, keeping them under control, and this turned everything upside down. I definitely want to be in Tokyo next year, I won a place for Mexico in the synchro 3m springboard. But one of the things sport has taught me is to see the other side of the coin. I have a lot of positive things happening now in my life and I must be ready for a dramatic change like this. The additional year of training and preparation may even be beneficial for me, so I take that as a positive in this situation. I need to gain some weight and this extra time can help me on this. Also in the technical part of the dives I will have more time to fine-tune some aspects. I spoke with my coach and he is relaxed and serene – this helps me a lot. Instead of being a burden, this additional year will keep our dream still more alive and will help us get the necessary inspiration to perform well in Tokyo.
What will this crisis change in terms of sport, and in society in general?

Sport is very noble, very authentic, very filled with passion. As athletes, we will overcome this. We are competitive people, and we know there are always obstacles in our way, stones in our path. This is definitely a big one, but we will overcome it. We are all in the same situation. The values sport brought to all of us will prevail in these circumstances. Sport will show to the world that whatever the difficulties, we can overcome them. In general, I believe we will have to change some things in our lives, to rethink how we live. We will be back to our normal routine, but with a different, better focus in life. We had time to be at home, to think, to enjoy our families, to know what is really important, that we need to take care of ourselves, that health is a priority… We will face our work, our social relations in a different way… Unity, empathy and solidarity with the others will be values that we will need to praise and practise more. We will be the same, but better human beings than before!