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Steven LoBue (USA): “The pandemic showed we are all equal”

Pedro Adrega, Editor-in-chief of “FINA Aquatics World” magazine

A “new normal”. That is the way Steven LoBue foresees existence after the COVID-19 pandemic. A new reality with new rules and new limitations, but also a new way of life, demonstrating that, despite differences, we are all “equal”. Now 35, the 2017 high diving world champion had intended 2020 to be his last year in competition. Silver medallist at the FINA World Championships in Gwangju, an excellent result even if he did not retain his title, a couple of months after finishing sixth at the FINA World Cup, 2019 had been a mixed year for the American. The 2020 season was meant to mark his farewell but then came the coronavirus, and the worldwide health crisis severely altered his plans.

Initially a pool diver – he competed at the Olympic Trials for the US team in 2004 - LoBue is one of the most recognisable faces in the world of diving. At (1.61m/5ft 3ins), one of the shortest competitors in the field, his morphology brought him an undeniable advantage, the capacity of easily executing somersaults. He was the first to perform five of them in the same dive, thus acquiring the nickname “king of somersaults”.

He reached the pinnacle of his career at the 2017 Budapest FINA Worlds, when he was “there” at the right moment. That sole opportunity occurred when Gary Hunt (GBR) badly executed one of his masterpiece dives and LoBue, extremely consistent during the final, grabbed gold and became world champion. In South Korea, last year, Hunt did not falter and LoBue had to be content with silver. Besides the two podium presences at the FINA World Championships, the American amassed three more medals at FINA events: silver at the 2017 World Cup and two bronzes in the same event, in 2014 and 2015.

Based in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, LoBue tells how his life was deeply affected in these last months due to the pandemic but expresses his confidence that a new normal may give him and all humankind new goals and objectives in the future. Also a father of a four-year-old daughter, he is thankful for the opportunity that the lockdown gave him to enjoy his family and create a new home environment.



“Time to evaluate my career”

How was your 2019 season and what were your initial plans for 2020?

My 2019 season was slightly disappointing for me. I added a new dive to my programme (back 4 somersaults, 2 twists) and it didn't come around as quickly as expected, so I had mixed results. However, despite a tumultuous season, I was able to secure the silver medal at the 2019 World Championships in Gwangju, South Korea. After the 2019 season I took some time to evaluate my career and had decided to make 2020 my last competitive season before retiring. The goal was to actually simplify my diving list a little bit and really focus on quality and overall enjoyment.

When did you feel that the situation was getting really bad?

It was such a strange feeling watching the world struggle with the virus, and there was a period where I was just waiting for it to start affecting our daily lives. I had a trip planned to visit family in March but as airlines slowly shut down and certain states started their lockdown procedures, everything became very real and it was clear that we were on a path of uncertainty.

“Rigorous mental training”

How did the lockdown go in Florida? What were the effects of these measures in your life?

My family and I were on lockdown for a little over two months and we are still dealing with very limited openings [LoBue was interviewed in the first days of July 2020]. Though it affects everyone differently, the effects of the quarantine are something almost everyone at this point has experience with. Obviously the biggest change in my life was that the gym and pool were off limits, so finding ways to stay healthy and motivated was a huge challenge and I definitely had to turn my attention to more rigorous mental training.

How did you adapt to the situation? Did you develop new hobbies during this period? Did you do things never done before at home?

I think as athletes we have a bit of an advantage in all of this craziness. Whether it's adapting to new situations on the fly or responding to stress, I think our respective sports do a great job preparing us to handle the uncertainties that lie ahead. During the quarantine, like most everyone, I had a massive uptick in family time, which truly felt like a blessing. With a four-year-old daughter my hobbies included running around like a crazy person and playing games all day!

Are you back to “normal” life? If not, when do you expect it will be possible?

Things are slowly returning to whatever the “new normal” will be. Unfortunately, without centralised leadership in the United States, things are taking longer than expected. At this point, I am crossing my fingers that I can evolve into a semi-normal training schedule in preparation for the 2021 season.



“I truly cherish the extra family time”

Can you point out any pleasant memories from this challenging period?

The extra family time is something I truly cherish, especially at a time when so many were/are separated from their loved ones. Though daily life has changed quite a bit and new challenges continue to present themselves, this pandemic brought us closer together as a family and I am thankful for that.

How did you manage to keep fit?

Honestly, chasing a four-year-old around all day and playing is tough work! I was able to squeeze in some home workouts throughout the week but between staying active and managing my diet, things worked out great.

Mental wise, did you feel anxiety/fear of the unknown? What strategies have you used to help?

The fear and anxiety of not knowing when lockdown would end or what things would look like when it did was definitely a heavy weight to carry. I adopted a “one day at a time” strategy and just tried to make the best of each

day. I found some solace in knowing that this is happening to everyone around the world, and while times may be tough we are all in this together.

Financially, how do you adapt to this?

Obviously with the competition season cancelled, many athletes lose their main source of income and I was no exception. Luckily during the re-opening phase in my state, I was able to pick up a job coaching gymnastics. I feel fortunate to be employed during these tough times. However, training for the future has now become increasingly difficult, with work eating up 9+ hours a day and family time occupying the rest.

“I’ll be slightly nervous before my first dive!”

You are obviously eager to re-start competition. What will you share with your friends from the circuit?

I am very much looking forward to being able to see my second family again! It will be fun to share stories and experiences from around the world and I think the time away will increase everyone’s appreciation for how fortunate we are to travel the world and do what we love for a living. As for competition, it will have been well over 1.5 years since my last high dive, so I will be slightly nervous to say the least! Other than that, I expect everyone will be in great shape and fully healed up heading into the 2021 season.

The post-pandemic world... Will we be living in a different rhythm or will nothing change?

From my perspective, society will never be the same as it was. As we wait for the “new normal”, I’m hoping this pandemic sheds light on to the fact that as humans we are more alike than we are different. Regardless of nationality, race, gender or socio-economic status we are all at risk or affected in some way by this pandemic and are therefore equal. I’m hoping this sense of togetherness will help us rebuild a stronger and more compassionate society in the future.

Hoping the crisis gets sorted out, what are the plans for 2021? New dives in perspective?

For 2021, the goal is to return to an easier programme. I did this for a number of reasons, mainly because I would like 2021 to be my last competitive season and as such I wanted to reduce stress and just enjoy the venues and competitions fully. That said, there are still divers consistently in the Top 5 who have simpler programmes, so with a bit more relaxation comes an increase in consistency, which has always been an issue for me.
