

The Diving Journey - Catherine, Year 5, NSW

You can do this, Abby thought to herself, *just go*.

As she threw herself off the 3-metre springboard, she flipped and twisted but then... WHAM, she slapped her legs on the water. As she resurfaced, Abby looked at her coach, Lauren, who motioned for her to come over. *Oh no. Did I do something wrong?*

Questioning herself yet again, doubting herself yet again, it was a terrible habit of hers, perpetual self-doubt. There's this nagging little voice that lives in her head, an evil little monster; she imagined it ate, nibbled and grew fat from feeding on her self-confidence. She wished that it would just zip it. As she swam over, all the possible terrible things her coach could say to her bounced around her head like rubber balls.

"So..." Lauren began, "You're doing well, but... you will need to step it up a notch if you want a chance to place at nationals. You can go now."

Abby sighed with relief as she got out of the pool. *That wasn't as bad as I expected*.

"I just have to figure out a way to sort out my back one and a half, full twist," she muttered to herself.

As soon as she got home, she diligently started watching videos of other divers doing a back one and a half sommie, full twist. For 20 minutes straight, Abby researched how to do execute the dive well and she visualised herself doing the dive over and over, flipping through the air. By the time she crawled under the duvet covers that night, she felt more mentally prepared than ever.

After a long and tiring day at school, Abby caught the train to her diving centre, Sydney Olympic Park Aquatic Center (SOPAC). Promptly at 5pm she started her diving session with stretching, strength and conditioning. By the time she stepped onto the springboards, she was whipping through her dive set flawlessly. There was barely a splash as she cut through the water. She'd never felt more confident.

When it was time to do her back layout full twist, Abby felt ready. Then the little monster in her head resurfaced, taunting her, whispering 'flop, flop, flop'.

Stop that, brain, Abby thought to herself, *stop being so annoying*.

As she stepped onto the 3-metre springboard and slowly but strongly started her TIO, she silently muttered words of encouragement. She threw herself off the board, did one and a half somersault and a full twist before opening up and looking for the water. As she put her hands up towards her head, she fumbled. Something was off and a split second later her head

smacked the water. As she plunged deeper into the ice-cold diving well, her head throbbed, and she was overwhelmed with shock and fear.

Lauren will be so disappointed in me, Abby thought, I am so bad. The monster in her head was back and it was smirking.

Lauren had been Abby's coach ever since she started diving in Year 2. It was Lauren who encouraged her to do a straight jump off the one-metre board when she was a clueless little 7-year-old who thought diving was water gymnastics. Lauren is a competitive diver who is part of the AIS Diving Australia Program. She coaches at Abby's school on top of her serious training commitments at SOPAC. Abby always admired and looked up to Lauren, and she hated disappointing her, it was like disappointing a parent. As she hauled herself onto the edge of the pool, she sheepishly turned her throbbing head towards Lauren, dreading what she was going to say.

"Abby," Lauren started, "Even though that wasn't one of your best dives, and you might think that you are a terrible diver, I need you to know that just because you do a bad dive, it doesn't mean that you are a bad diver. You are still amazing."

As these words absorbed into Abby's brain like honey seeping through bread, she started to feel better about herself. Her eyes started to moisten, and a few tears ran down her cheeks. *Wow, Abby thought, I just fell apart on that dive, but she still believes in me.*

Reassured by her coach's words, Abby gave every dive 200% from then on. With every diving session she trained harder than ever and got a bit better each time. Even her back one and a half sommie full twist was improving which was a surprise! Now that she knew her coach believed in her no matter what, she was unstoppable. She had silenced, muffled, the self-doubt monster in her head.

That was, until the big flop.

The following afternoon at practice, Abby was doing her front two and a half somersault, when she jumped up too high and spun really too quickly! As she was coming down, she had already finished her somersaults and open up just above the board before— SLAP! — she smacked the tops of her feet on the springboard.

The force from the hit caused Abby's legs to flip over, and she splashed into the water with her legs over her head, slapping them with such force it felt like she had hit the ground.

Everything hurt, her toes, her back, her legs, it all stung. As she resurfaced, she felt the eyes of everyone at the pool burning into her. Immediately her cheeks flamed red. She plunged her face back into the cool water, desperately trying to turn the flame off, but it was useless.

As she gingerly climbed out of the pool, her legs ached, and her feet stung. Once she looked down at her feet, she realised they looked how they felt. Shades of purple, red and blotches of blue and her legs were red as a devil.

Oh no, oh no. ..this is not good, she thought to herself. And what's worse, my mum will probably have a conniption. Quickly her eyes met Lauren's, who motioned for her to come over with a look of concern on her face. Abby sheepishly trundled over and inhaled a deep breath. *Here we go.*

Lauren was in crisis mode; divers take safety incredibly seriously because diving is a very dangerous sport. Lauren made her move her feet around to check for range of motion and make sure nothing was broken or sprained. Satisfied that there was no real damage, Lauren calmed down and asked Abby if she was okay.

Abby nodded instinctively, "I'm fine, I'm okay," she muttered, but her legs stung, and her feet hurt. Lauren instructed Abby to go soak in the hot tub and let the warm water relieve some of the pain.

The second she got home, Abby told her mother what happened, and she was extremely worried. She instructed Abby to get a good night's rest and take it easy tomorrow. Abby obediently followed mum's strict instructions.

It was surprising how quickly her feet healed and after a week the bruises were gone. Abby was making progress, and her entries were getting increasingly clean, leaving a tiny splash as the only reminder she had broken the surface of the water. She was getting nervous, but she knew that she had all the skills to do well, she just needed to believe in herself.

Abby woke up at 5am with a startle. As she stretched her arms, the realisation set in.

"It's Nationals today!" she suddenly yelled to the air.

She leaped out of bed, put on her pair of NSW swimmers and threw on her tracksuit. She bounded downstairs to find her mum making breakfast.

"You will need lots of energy to do well today," she said. Abby gave her mum the biggest bear hug.

After a delicious breakfast of scrambled eggs and crispy bacon, her mother did her hair. It was their ritual, as her mom combed through the knots and put her hair in a double ponytail, Abby knew she was ready.

An hour later, Abby was at SOPAC for the nationals. The speaker blared, "Abigail Smith. 501C. Forward two and a half somersaults."

Abby started the hurdle and then did two and a half beautiful somersaults before a rip entry in the water. But the little monster was back in her head. *You will fail. You will fail;* it taunted.

Her next 4 dives went smoothly and now it was time for her back one and a half somersault, full twist. She took in a deep breath and murmured to herself, "You got this!"

As she leapt up, she somersaulted, gracefully twisted in the air and then sliced through the water.

As Abby stood on the podium, her smile lit up the entire stadium. She dipped her head, and the presenter looped the shiny gold medal around her neck, the whole crowd cheered. Lauren was clapping so hard her hands were red. So was her mum. Abby's self-confidence was back. The only voice in her head, hers. As for the monster, it's starving.

I did it, she thought.