

DIVING

DOUBLE IMPACT

A former Olympic gymnast, in Beijing **ALEX CROAK** plans to take a dive

Some athletes have only one Olympic career. At 24, Alex Croak has two. As a 16-year-old gymnast, the Sydneysider was, she admits, "overwhelmed" by the experience of her home Games in 2000. She went on to win individual silver and team gold medals at the Comm Games, before retiring. However by '06, she was back, winning another Commonwealth silver medal, this time as a diver. In Beijing, she will be standing on the 10m platform.

Will you be aiming for a medal in Beijing?

Anything can happen on the day and I don't see why a medal should be out of reach.

Why are China your main rivals?

Their training regimen is a lot more intense than it is here. If they excel, they make a living out of diving, whereas we don't. As platform divers, the Chinese have quite small frames, so it's an advantage - it makes it easier to spin fast and hit the water without a splash.

How long were you a gymnast?

From the age of five to 18. Then I retired and took a year off.

Why take up diving?

I was getting bored of not doing anything physical. I took up diving because my gymnastics background helped; the skills are a definite advantage.

What new skills have you had to work on?

Fitness, because I'd been out of sport for a year. I'd lost a lot of muscle. I also had to change some technical aspects, because diving is very different.

What kind of things?

Take-off positions. In diving everything's a little bit more



MEN

Matthew Mitcham
10m platform,
3m springboard

Matthew Helm (above)
10m platform &
synchronised

Robert Newbery
10m & 3m
synchronised,
3m springboard

Scott Robertson
3m synchronised

WOMEN

Melissa Wu
10m platform &
synchronised

Briony Cole
10m & 3m
synchronised

Chantelle Newbery
3m springboard

Sharleen Stratton
3m springboard
& synchronised

Alex Croak
10m platform

vertical, up and down. How you hit the water depends on how you take off - preferably vertically. In gymnastics, it's more of a whippy action, so you fling your body around more, rather than being precise with angles.

How did gymnastics help you?

It helped with coordination, balance, body control and awareness, and discipline.

What's training like as a diver?

I train up to six hours a day and juggle a full-time uni degree. Three mornings a week, I do weights and biometrics; two mornings a week I do fitness. Every afternoon and on Saturday mornings, I dive. Not all the time is spent in the water.

What makes a good dive?

They look for the height of a dive; how high you jump; your position in the air; distance from the platform and how you go through the water.

Can you tell how good your dive has been when you hit the water?

I couldn't tell before, but I'm learning. Sometimes when you hit you think it's a good one, but the coach says it's a bit splashy. Generally I can tell, but occasionally I'm surprised.

How much pressure do you feel?

The pressure I feel is from my own expectations, because I know what I'm capable of and what's ahead.

What are you most looking forward to in Beijing?

The whole experience. I was very young, 16, for the Sydney Olympics and I was a bit overwhelmed by everything. This time, I'll appreciate things more, because I'm older, a bit wiser, a bit more thankful for where I am.



PHOTOGRAPHY: GREGG PORTEOUS (HELM); PATRICK HAMILTON (WU & NEWBERY); RICHARD ARTHUR (CROAK).

TALENT POOL

Talk about a blow-out. Schoolgirl Melissa Wu was just 28kg and 1.35m when she won silver at the 2006 Commonwealth Games. She's now a massive 37kg and 1.42m though, at 16, is still very much the baby of the team.

Australia will send nine divers to Beijing, our largest ever Olympic team. The 31-year-old veteran is Athens 10m platform gold medallist Chantelle Newbery, who flirted

Walk the plank: Wu (left) and Newbery.



with retirement before returning for one last shot. Husband Robert Newbery, an Athens and Sydney bronze medallist, joins her.

Why send such a large (not to mention old) contingent, when the Chinese will surely dominate in their own backyard? Because we won five diving medals last time and are seeking to "do better than previously", in the words

of Aussie head coach Hui Tong. And experience counts in this sport. Sure, the nubile Chinese divers slice the water like a knife through butter, but occasionally they go splat, too, as happened in Athens. Australian Diving is counting on our favourite sporting cliché, the "blend of youth and experience", even without team stalwart Loudy Wiggins, who failed to qualify due to injury.