

College Sport

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Budapest beckons for Wellington teen

MARK GEENTY

When he was 10, Anton Down-Jenkins first took the plunge at a diving have-a-go day in Wellington.

Surf lifesaving, swimming and water polo were his thing, as well as performing flips, so it seemed a natural progression to the springboards. He never looked back.

Seven years later, the year 13 Wellington High School student is off to Budapest, Hungary, in July as one of four New Zealand divers at the world championships. He'll face a field of 45-50 of the world's best in the men's 3m springboard.

It's a mind-boggling thought for Down-Jenkins, the star pupil of coach James Hardaker's Wellington Diving Club, who trains 20 hours a week over six days hurtling towards the deep Kilbirnie Pool water while making the smallest splash possible.

"It's insane. I never thought I'd be competing at one of the biggest international diving events this early in my career," he said, warming up for another after school training session.

The 17-year-old earned his world champs berth by winning two bronze medals in a grand prix event in Puerto Rico in May, at his second open international competition. He had company for both, with US-based Kiwi Liam Stone in the men's 3m synchro and fellow Wellington diver Yu Qian Goh (also US-based) in the mixed 3m synchro.

"I was really happy with that, super stoked. I went into it with no expectations at all, because it was one of my first big international competitions. Just to get on the podium showed me I can compete," Down-Jenkins said.

"It was incredible to train and compete against the best divers in the world, coming from New Zealand where I'm the only one in my age group. It's a bit nerve-racking and I get a bit intimi-



Wellington High School year 13 student Anton Down-Jenkins began diving at age 10 and was hooked.

dated but I guess that will settle as I get more competition experience."

When he first tried diving, Down-Jenkins was hooked immediately, likening it to gymnastics or trampolining on water. Striving for the perfect 10 is ample motivation.

"Nothing beats the accomplish-

ment of doing a good dive, when you hit the water and you know you've nailed it."

The fact Down-Jenkins has made it this far, to the top competition outside the Olympics, is a triumph in itself.

The oldest of Hardaker's Wellington divers by two years, he trains long hours solo with his

coach perched on a plastic chair poolside. Funding is nearly non-existent, aside from a Wellington High Performance Aquatics scholarship via Sport Wellington's pathway to podium scheme, which Down-Jenkins secured for the next two years.

Search Down-Jenkins' name and you'll see how he got to

Canada and Puerto Rico for his big international break: a Givealittle page where \$2884.50 was raised from 32 donors.

"It's pretty much a self-funded sport in New Zealand. There's lots of fundraising, lots of grant applications and very understanding parents," he said.

He hopes that will improve with

ever-increasing recognition for New Zealand divers, with Rio Olympian Elizabeth Cui, Shaye Boddington and Stone joining Down-Jenkins in Budapest for the July 14-30 worlds. Cui became New Zealand's first Olympic diver in 24 years last August.

Down-Jenkins will combine with Stone again in the 3m



"Nothing beats the accomplishment of doing a good dive."

Anton Down-Jenkins

synchro, and knows he probably needs to follow his team-mate's pathway to college in the United States. Stone trains and studies at the University of Tennessee and competes on the NCAA circuit.

The pair might be team-mates but could be competing for berths at next year's Commonwealth Games on the Gold Coast. New Zealand have two quota spots and whoever finishes in the top six in the Commonwealth in Budapest puts their name right in the frame.

Hardaker, a Yorkshireman who revived the Wellington Diving Club 14 years ago and now has around 80 divers, marvels at Down-Jenkins' work ethic. At the current rate the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo is well within his grasp, his coach believes.

"He's a student of diving. He doesn't just come and train; he likes to understand the sport. The physiology, the mechanics, the nutrition, the psychology," said Hardaker.

"He's very well-rounded and self-driven, and asks a lot of questions. His brain's always working. I'd call him an intelligent athlete, which is a massive help."

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