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THERE'S something about diving that keeps you glued to your seat once you see a diver preparing for her plunge. It's usually a nail-biting experience.

Imagine this. The diver takes her position (facing front or back), eyes looking straight ahead, pin-drop silence from the audience and, in a blink of an eye, she takes a leap (or sometimes runs and jumps) from the platform, skillfully somersaulting in mid-air before plunging into the depths beneath.

Then, comes my great relief that she didn't hit her head against the springboard, followed by a rapturous burst of loud applause from the spectators. Talk about the thrills and spills of diving!

To get a first-hand account of what it's like to be a diver, we delve into the life and career of our very own Malaysian diving princess, Pandelega Rinong.

THE BRAVE ONE

Pandelega, a Sarawakian of Bidayuh ethnicity, started diving when she was only eight years old. We know at that age, children are inquisitive and possess little or no fear of taking risks.

"I was asked to take the plunge from a 10m platform by my coach for the first time and I did! Partly to 'show off' a little in front of the other kids that I wasn't afraid," recalls Pandelega sheepishly.

THE PERFECT DIVE



THE ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE: GO FOR MORE THAN JUST A MEDAL

Always one who loves challenges and adventures, the diving experience left her thrilled for more adrenaline rushes. She fell in love with the sport and there has been no turning back since.

At a tender age of 14, Pandelega moved to Bukit Jalil Sports School in Kuala Lumpur to join the national diving team.

PERSEVERANCE AND SACRIFICES

"In the beginning, my family were concerned about me juggling between studies and training, but they eventually gave their 100% support for me to continue diving," says Pandelega, who is currently studying sports science and majoring in sports management at Universiti Malaya.

According to Pandelega, you need a lean and flexible physique to become a diver. Possessing the agility of gymnastics will be of added advantage because both sports share similar acrobatic movements.

Of course, be prepared for a lifetime commitment of routine and disciplined training.

"Let us all celebrate this Malaysia Day with a patriotic feeling in our hearts and continue to make our country proud."
- Pandelega

"During competition season, I undergo two intensive training sessions totaling eight hours a day, for six days a week. During non-competition season, I get to rest on Wednesday mornings, Saturday afternoons and Sundays.

"I usually wake up at 7:30am and have breakfast before my morning training session. After that, I will grab my lunch and have a quick nap before the afternoon training session begins. I will then have my dinner and study before heading for bed. That's basically my everyday routine," says Pandelega.

THE HIGHS AND LOWS

Like the many life experiences in our lives, Pandelega's career as a diver is also a journey of highs and lows. But for every stumbling block removed, those experiences can only make her success story and sacrifices more purposeful and worthwhile.

Pandelega's career highlights include her bronze medal wins at the 2012 London Olympics and the Diving World Championship in Kazan this year. Since then, the fruits of her labour have motivated her to do even better.

"Of course, there were times when you feel like you've hit the wall with sudden injuries, miscommunication and the pressure of keeping up with people's expectations of your performance. In those times, I seek support from my family, coaches and teammates.

"More important, I seek the comfort and guidance from God through prayers," explains Pandelega, who is a Christian.

"Eventually, everything will fall back into place beautifully."

MORE THAN JUST WINNING

Pandelega cited David Boudia, an American diver who shares the same faith, as her role model. For the uninitiated, Boudia is a gold medalist in the

men's 10m platform diving at the 2012 Olympics in London.

It's reported that Boudia's perspective of competing in the sport changed after discovering his purpose in life through Christ, and it is to glorify God in what he does instead of chasing after his own fame, money and pleasure.

"Similarly, I want to dedicate my every effort and win in diving to Him. Other than improving the lives of my family back home, I also want to make Malaysia proud of my achievements.

"My next goal is to train really hard to do well at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games," says Pandelega of her aspirations and hopes after qualifying for the games recently.

PARTING THOUGHTS

Asked for her advice for those who want to establish a career in sports, she says, "Never give up when obstacles come your way. When you feel like throwing in the towel, remind yourself why you started your sports endeavour in the first place.

"And whatever comes your way, keep on fighting while you still have breath. After all, every beginning must have an ending to it. So, in your career journey, ensure you live to see yourself reaching your destination."

My conclusion? In doing competitive sports, agility, tenacity and focus are some of the crucial elements in scoring or winning a game.

These qualities are often vital complementary building blocks that make great sportspeople like Pandelega shine for Malaysia.



■ Although Lay Hsuan doesn't possess a high bodily-kinesthetic intelligence when it comes to sports, she can still skip rope relatively well. She hopes all Malaysians had a Happy Malaysia Day! Please write in if you have an interesting career journey to share with her.