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Diving into athletes' minds.

(Dave Stubbs - The Gazette)

Psychologist Bruno Ouellette helps world champ Alexandre Despatie and his teammates use their heads to harness pool potential.

The physical strength of Laval diver Alexandre Despatie is apparent with every springboard-bending hurdle, every tightly curled somersault, every high-speed twist. His power was clear on each of his 17 dives on Tuesday, a day-long effort that yielded a historic world's-best 3-metre points total and a stunning world championship gold medal.

But it was much more than muscle that carried Despatie to his second world title in two years. It was his resolute focus, a steely stare at the ultimate goal. Despatie won when his mind harnessed his strength and allowed his body to reach its potential.

Diving under the weight of a country's expectations, the pressure of a flag-waving hometown capacity crowd bearing down on him, the 20-year-old had every reason to fail. "Yes," said diving team psychologist Bruno Ouellette, an honours student at Glass Half Full University. "But he also had every opportunity to succeed."

Ouellette has worked in high-performance sport going on two decades and almost three years with the elite CAMO squad of coach Michel Larouche, Canada's best diving club and one that would be ranked among the top five nations in the world.

The 41-year-old native of St. Jean sur Richelieu has served as a guidance counsellor, sounding board, quiet cheerleader, even a sympathetic ear for Larouche and his team.

He sat on the pool deck yesterday, Despatie practising for today's one-metre event, and spoke of the months of mental preparation, a virtual yellow brick road that's led to this land of awe. "We've talked about the energy of the (home) crowd and how to use it," Ouellette said. "We've seen it since Sunday, starting with the kids (10-metre synchronized bronze medallists Meghan Benfeito and Roseline Filion). "To be

cheered so loud creates an emotional reaction that's a total body experience. We're not in this situation too often."

Ouellette has been pleased, even proud, to see the divers making mental adjustments to this stimulus overload, riding an emotional rollercoaster from preliminaries through finals, and semifinal rounds for Despatie and Emilie Heymans, who yesterday missed a platform medal with two weak dives. "Throughout the entire day, Alex was in control of his head," Ouellette said. "There were a lot of things going on, and he wasn't always 100-per-cent confident, far from it. "It was an ongoing process that went on for eight hours, from 10 o'clock until he became world champion at 6 p.m. That's a heck of a performance, needing to 'be there' for eight hours."

A 100.80-point effort on the final-session reverse 31/2, rescued after a shabby takeoff, reinforced Ouellette's belief that Despatie was supremely dialled in. The dive had been decidedly subpar in the preliminaries as well, and was poor in Athens. "You have to understand the process of how fear develops," he said. "When you miss something a few times in big events, then you have memories that come back that you have no control over. You must deal with powerful doubts. "At times, Alex has been able to do that, and he was here."

Ouellette is spread like sunscreen at this meet, also working with the synchronized swim team, CAMO swimmer Audrey Lacroix, and leaving the island to spend time with most of Canada's short-track speed skaters, whose Turin Olympic winter Games trials are only weeks away.

The CAMO program leaves not even the tiniest detail unattended. At the elite level, Larouche does everything to give his athletes the best opportunity to succeed, and Ouellette is a key ingredient.

With Despatie, who is mature beyond his years, it's all about focus. The turning point came when injury prompted a decision to abandon 10 metres this summer, and forgo defending his world championship, in favour of the springboard. "By making this decision, Alex gained a sense of control," Ouellette said. "I think that, mentally, he said: 'I'm diving because of me, because I like it. If I focus on making myself happy, then people will also get to see me at my best.' "

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