

This page and opposite: Alicia Blagg performs against the spectacular backdrop of Barcelona's Olympic diving pool on Montjuic Hill
Photos: Tim Lee



INTRODUCING...

ALICIA BLAGG

At 13, she has become the first product of British Diving's talent identification programme to win a senior national title. In fact she won two in the same weekend – something not even her role model Tom Daley achieved at that age. **Roger Guttridge** reports

For 13-year-old Alicia Blagg, it was a weekend of superlatives to compare even with her role model Tom Daley's remarkable record of achievement at the same age. In fact not even Britain's 15-year-old world champion has matched a couple of Alicia's accomplishments at the recent British Gas National Diving Cup in Sheffield. Her victories in the women's 1m springboard and, with Olympian Rebecca Gallantree in the 3m synchro, made her the first athlete from British Diving's talent identification scheme to win a senior national title – and the youngest-ever English national double champion. And only Tom himself has won one senior national title at a younger age, and that by only a few weeks.

Back in 2004 Alicia was the youngest of 25 primary school children selected from 2,000 youngsters who took part in talent identification tests run by British Diving in conjunction with Leeds City Council. Within six months she had won her first medal at the Thistle Trophy Cup in Edinburgh before being crowned national novice champion in April 2005 and winning her first medal at the ASA Elite Junior Championships the following month (in the 1m synchro with Hannah Starling). By then, she was a member of Leeds' top squad (and, at the age of eight, its youngest member by far), training alongside Gallantree and fellow Olympian Tandi Gerrard. An invitation to join British Diving's elite talent programme soon followed.

Her progress since then has been rapid and consistent. After competing in individual events at the elite juniors for the first time in 2006 and finishing in the top eight in all her events, she returned a year later to win four gold medals in the 11 and under age group. At the 2008 elite juniors, she won silver the 12-13yrs 3m springboard and in February

2009 she beat Olympian Hayley Sage and European junior medallists to claim a fifth place in the senior British Championships. This was especially impressive given that, at 12, she was the youngest competitor and had learnt some of her complicated skills only six weeks before. Around the same time she became one of only a handful of British girls – and the youngest – to perform the complex three-and-a-half somersault dive.

Now Alicia is a double national champion and her coach Edwin Jongejans believes qualification for the Commonwealth Games and other international championships is within her reach for 2010.

'That would be an amazing achievement in her first eligible year,' says the Dutch former world champion. 'She has achieved these results on only 14 to 16 hours of training a week and she'll be against divers doing 30 hours. Alicia is very talented but it's still early days and there is a lot of work to do in an event in which you need to be an adult.'

He added: 'There is no comparison with Tom Daley. She is on a board where divers mature later.'

Alicia herself is hoping 2010 will bring her first experience of international competition at the top level, starting with last month's FINA World Cup in Moscow, where she was due to partner Gallantree in the 3m synchro. 'I'm hoping we might be able to do the 2012 Olympics – that would be exciting,' she said.

She appears unfazed by recent comparisons of her with the young man she describes as her inspiration. 'It's flattering and Tom Daley does inspire me because he has achieved so much at such a young age,' she says. 'I'm hoping to do as well as him. But I don't feel any extra pressure from that.' 