

Making a big splash in Thousand Oaks' water world

■ Andy Sweet, 11, shows promise with the Dive Thousand Oaks club.

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Plunging nearly 15 feet from his backyard treehouse onto a black trampoline was as adventurous as Andy Sweet planned to get last summer.

Then the adventurous 11-year-old Thousand Oaks resident decided to find a new way to exercise his need for jumping thrills. The swimming pool provided the perfect target.

Sweet picked diving as a new hobby in June, and is now carving his niche by taking the plunge off of spring diving boards as a member of Dive Thousand Oaks, a local diving club formed in 1989. Sweet, who made his first dive about five or six years ago, turned in a respectable performance at the U.S. Junior Olympic Diving Championships last month in Mesa, Ariz., with two top

10 finishes.

With the trampoline giving way to a heated pool, Sweet now performs double somersault and reverse dives in water that tops out at about 82 degrees. Sweet's mother saw an ad about the diving club, and the Colina Middle School sixth-grader was eager to join.

"It's like a roller coaster ride when you dive off the board. You go up and then down," Sweet said. "I love jumping off high places. When I got the trampoline, I wondered what it would be like to land and bounce on it. Diving is kind of the same thing."

That's true. Except there's now competition when performing his difficult dives.

Sweet has improved his techniques under the close supervision of Dive Thousand Oaks Coach Bill Douglas, who founded the club.

Sweet and Douglas work on dives about three hours every week at the Thousand Oaks High School pool. Douglas, a former diver and Newbury Park High School gradu-

ate, sits poolside on a partially dented gray fold-up chair and offers the soft-spoken Sweet advice on how to use his legs and arms during 1- and 3-meter dives.

Douglas said Sweet's learning curve has improved.

"The thing about Andy is that he wants to do the harder dives like the forward double somersault or a forward 1 1/2 somersault with one twist," Douglas said. "In the short amount of time he's been with us, Andy has done well. The neatest thing about kids is when they learn a new dive and they enjoy the experience. Andy's doing just that."

Sweet's most memorable experience this season occurred during the Junior Olympic Diving Championships. He helped Dive Thousand Oaks bring 15 medals back to the Conejo Valley after competing against divers from California, Nevada, Arizona and Colorado.

He finished third overall in the 11-and-under boys' 1-meter dive with a score of 171.00, and then placed fifth in the 11-and-under

boys' 3-meter dive with a mark of 178.05.

Sweet also dove in two 13-and-under events, taking 10th in the boys' 3-meter (164.65) and 14th on the 1-meter (152.45).

"I was nervous competing in the championships," Sweet said before a recent practice. "Some of the competitors have been diving for six or seven years. Then I relaxed when I started to get better marks than some of them. I think I did well in my first year here, and that's because Bill worked with me for a lot of hours to be successful."

What Sweet had to encounter during the two-day competition was practicing his dives around 6 a.m., three hours before the meet began, in the unusually cool and windy weather conditions in Arizona. Dive Thousand Oaks, which has 39 members, had eight boys competing in the Junior Olympics level for 10- and 11-year-olds.

"They say that diving is 70% mental and 30% physical," said Douglas, a Newbury Park resident.

"If you like to dive, then you have to be willing to trust the process. I prep Andy and the other divers to do certain kinds of dives. Andy is more daring and willing to experience the harder dives.

"I think Andy made his mark down in Mesa. Usually the first time I see a diver, I can see where they'll end up. Some kids have that natural ability, and Andy tends to learn very fast. I hope he sticks with diving because Andy has the capability to be a national-level diver."

That's high praise for a youngster who is a little more than two years away from high school.

Sweet, wiping away the water from his chin after doing a back somersault tuck 1-meter practice dive, said he plans to continue his diving career with Dive Thousand Oaks and when he enters high school.

"Nothing beats diving in the water," Sweet said.

That's a long way from the treehouse and trampoline.

