

**Julia Tate, North Penn**

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Julia Tate is a study in courage, perseverance and sheer determination.

The North Penn junior hyper-extended her knee during a non-league meet against Ridley in early January. It's the kind of injury that would have ended the season of most athletes.

Tate, however, is not most athletes.

In a remarkable display of guts and determination, Tate – wearing a knee brace – came back to capture the gold at the District One Class AAA meet.

"Everything fell into place somehow," she said. "I don't even know. It just happened. When I won, I was so excited. I can't even explain. Going through all that pain, it was really nice to win districts."

For good measure, the gifted junior picked up a fifth place medal at the recent PIAA Class AAA meet to cap a miraculous comeback.



"I watched her during this whole thing, and she really grew as a person," Maiden diving coach Sue McDonald said. "I think a lot of diving came easily for her because she had been a gymnast, but now she had to work just to get back to where she was in January.

"It made her a much stronger person, and she already was a strong person."

In truth, no one could have imagined a scenario like this when Tate injured her right knee during her timed warm-ups that fateful Saturday in early January.

"The board was tighter than it normally was, and I wasn't expecting it, so my knee hyper-extended because it wasn't used to the tightness of the board," Tate said. "I competed in the rest of the meet. I thought it was no big deal."

Tate captured first place, and it wasn't until the following Monday that she realized something serious was wrong.

"I tried to get on the board, and my knee just kept giving out," she said. "It was painful. I was scared – 'What is going on?'"

"I would be in the middle dive, and it would just give out. It was pretty scary."

Tate's doctor recommended she not dive.

"With Julia – and you have to know Julia – that was not an option for her," McDonald said. "It was never a question with Julia – it was with me because I can't take the responsibility of injuring an athlete further and possibly doing permanent damage.

"In her mind, it was never a question whether she was going to dive or not. She was very determined, and her determination came through in a big way."

Tate's mother, Dr. Angela Tate, is a physical therapist, and Julia began a rigorous exercise program. She watched from the sidelines as her teammates closed out the regular season.

"I had to rest – no dives – and just do physical therapy," she said. "I probably did that for a month and a half. It was horrible.

"I would sit there every day at practice and watch everyone else. We had all those 11-dive meets, and I couldn't do any of those."

Of comfort to Tate was the fact that her fellow divers – led by LaSalle University-bound Laurie McLaughlin - carried the torch while she was gone.

A week and a half before districts, Tate was back on the diving board but was limited to the required dives. Two days before districts, she was given the green light to add her optional dives.

"It was hard," Tate said. "I would be irritated when I got home from practice. I was worried because I didn't think I would make it to states because the other girls had been practicing all those months, and I wasn't."

Tate was more than equal to the task, posting a score of 395.35 and easily defeating Pennsbury's Emily Howard (370.90) in the battle for the gold.

At states, Tate even surprised herself.

"I felt like I didn't have a good day," she said. "Normally I can tell when I'm having a good day, and I was not having a good day until the last round. Then I just nailed all three of my dives, but even then, I still didn't think I placed."

But Tate's performance was good enough for fifth place, and McDonald cannot help but feel eternally grateful when she recalls that summer day in 2005 when she was approached on the pool deck at Towamencin by a former gymnast looking to try her hand at diving.

"Julia said, 'I'm a gymnast. Do you think I can try diving?'" McDonald recalled.

The rest is history for an athlete who had dedicated her life to gymnastics.

"I had been a gymnast since I was four years old," Tate said. "It was always my dream that I was going to do college gymnastics. I was prepping to be a level 10, which is the highest in gymnastics.

"It was in the summer before ninth grade, and I was doing a geinger on the bars. I slipped and fell flat on the ground and fractured my vertebrae. My doctor and mom agreed I had to stop because if I didn't I would probably reinjure it, and I could end up paralyzed. I was devastated. I cried for weeks."

Those tears must seem like a distant memory to a diver who was a natural from the start.

"Diving is the same motion as a lot of stuff in gymnastics," Tate said. "It's just an easier landing."

Diving also lent itself to a lighter schedule. As a gymnast, Tate arrived home from school at three but was at the gym by 4 and didn't arrive home until 10:30 every day.

"Even though diving isn't as much time, it's still equally rewarding," she said.

Tate is the first district champion McDonald has coached in her 10 years at the helm, and she is looking to come back even stronger next season.

"She's not afraid," McDonald said. "She added three more dives to her list this year. She probably has the highest amount of DD (degree of difficulty) of anyone in the district. She's just determined.

"She already told me what dives she wants to learn for next year."

Tate, who also excels in the classroom, was one of 15 students selected from the Montgomery and Bucks County area to travel to Europe as legislative ambassadors with People to People. The trip, which takes place July 7-20, will include stops in England, Spain, France and Belgium. Along the way, the students will meet dignitaries, including Queen Elizabeth II.

"I'm excited because I don't know anybody, and that will make it even more fun," Tate said.

Tate has her sights set on one day becoming a lawyer. Look for her to defend her clients with the same tenacity she showed during a remarkable diving season just completed.