

Olympian water babe

Paralympic gold medallist Yip Pin Xiu loves the freedom that swimming brings her



akshita nanda

Paralympic swimmer Yip Pin Xiu's apartment in Upper Serangoon is full of reminders of what the wheelchair-bound champion can and cannot do.

Next to a piano which her weakened fingers can no longer play is a tall glass cabinet housing the dozens of medals the 18-year-old has accumulated in six years of competitive swimming.

Around stairs that she cannot climb, the walls sport photographs of her receiving honours in countries from here to China, including the gold she won at the Beijing Paralympics in 2008 for the 50m backstroke, and the Singapore Youth Award last July, for services to the community. The award is the highest national accolade given to youth.

She is a human dynamo in her wheelchair, custom-made to fit her tiny frame and sponsored by an unknown donor. Wheeling faster than I can walk, she zips around the furniture, making a beeline for the dining table. She stops, braces her arms on the table and swings into a cushioned chair, hauling her unresponsive legs up to sit cross-legged. The two-second gymnastic feat is performed with grace and stunning speed.

It is not good enough for Yip, who wriggles her arms thoughtfully while bursting into chatter. In one long breath, she offers drinks, hollers for older brother Augustus to provide them and asks me what my questions are, ending with: "I have to bulk up, I've lost weight because I'm not training."

Speed is much on her mind, even though the sports and health student at Republic Polytechnic is supposed to be taking a short break after the Asian Para games in Guangzhou last month.

With not enough swimmers to compete against in her class, she could not bring back any prizes from that regional contest for disabled athletes. However, last August, she won a gold medal for the 50m backstroke at international trials in the Netherlands and qualified for next year's Paralympic Games in London.

The Paralympics are the Olympics of disability sports and Yip won Singapore's first-ever gold in 2008. Training for the next round begins next month but she is already raring to go, training with laps around the pool in her condominium.

She is one of two swimmers the Republic will field in the London Paralympics. The other is Theresa Goh, who swims in the S5 class for disabled swimmers. Paralympic athletes are grouped in classes S1 to S13, where S1 competitors are the most severely disabled.

Yip swims in the S3 class, for swimmers who can use their arms but have no use of their legs or trunk. She started out as an S5 six years ago.

She suffers from a condition called muscular dystrophy, which means her body is slowly breaking down, muscle after muscle losing their ability to function. There is no cure and no medicine can alleviate her condition, though her doctor, Singapore Sports Council's Cormac O'Muircheartaigh, says swimming has helped strengthen unaffected muscles.



Paralympic champion Yip Pin Xiu may not be able to climb the stairs at home, but in the pool, she cuts through the water like a fish. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

Still, over the years, she has gone from coping with a mere limp to completely losing her ability to walk and kick. She also cannot grasp objects with her fingers, making simple tasks such as drinking water from a glass a feat of great dexterity (she clasps it between her palms).

Text messages and Facebook updates are typed with one finger – and as speedily as any other teen – but she does need help dressing, especially for the photo shoot for this article.

Like other young women, she enjoys wearing pretty clothes, costume jewellery and make-up, but she needs someone to button her shirts, clasp her earrings and wield her lip gloss.

She enjoys the fuss as I squint and apply mascara to her lashes and tirelessly answers questions exploring the limits of what she can do. Yes, she can manage stairs through a series of tiring "dips and squats". Stares are easier to handle and the wheelchair attracts plenty in public. She does not mind questions from strangers and even answers them. "I'm okay with what I am," she says.

No, she cannot cook – even making toast can lead to burns. She also needs help pulling on her swimming costume and fellow athletes such as Goh, a close friend, usually assist her during overseas competitions.

Yip is the only one in the family with muscular dystrophy and her family members do their best to help out with everyday details.

Her mother, Margaret, 55, a senior staff officer at Singapore Airlines, whips

up healthy meals, makes her take vitamins and keeps the fridge stocked with ready-to-eat snacks suitable for an athlete, such as fruit.

Yip's businessman father Chee Khiong, 55, drives her to the polytechnic and to training sessions at Farrer Park Swimming Complex. "He'll make sure I attend every single one," she says.

Her older brothers, engineer Alvin, 25, and Nanyang Technological University engineering student Augustus, 23, are always ready to whip up meals, run around the flat looking for objects she has mislaid or give her piggy-back rides up the stairs. "She's the youngest, she's disabled, it's natural," says Augustus, in between dashing upstairs for his sister's freshly laundered clothes and making spaghetti for lunch. "We all just want her to be happy."

And happy she seems to be. Asked if she ever feels angry or depressed because of her condition, she shakes her head with a smile. "Without this disability, I wouldn't be talking to you," she teases.

It turns out that her positive attitude is well known. Her swim coach Jiao Yang, 31, has known her for six years and describes her as "happy sunshine". Words such as "bubbly" are used by staff at the Singapore Disability Sports Council, which helped Yip turn a love for water into a career.

Chinese-language teacher Angela Chan, 33, taught her when she was in Bendemeer Secondary School and remembers her as a lively student who was always surrounded by friends. "Rather than a teacher being a role model, she was a role model for me. I never once heard her complain," she says.

Yip would rather count her blessings,

insisting: "I'm able to do a lot of things, though I need help for some. I'd say I'm independent."

Indeed, she thinks nothing of wheeling off on her own to a nearby mall or taking the train downtown when meeting friends for lunch. Asked if any of them is a boyfriend, she giggles guiltily and changes the subject.

"I like taking risks. When I was six, I climbed the Great Wall of China," she says, presenting photographs of her younger self on holiday with her parents and two brothers.

Images of the past show her clambering up statues, climbing steps and trudging merrily in snow. For much of her young life, she could walk and run like others around her.

From age two to six, she wore foot-to-knee braces to support weakening leg muscles and walked with a limp. From seven to 10, her fingers could no longer manage piano lessons and it became progressively more difficult to stand. Classmates at Ai Tong Primary School had to help her up the four flights of stairs to class. Most were eager to assist, but some taunted her for being different.

Her mother remembers that time well, saying Yip became shy and unwilling to take part in outdoor activities until she started using a wheelchair in 2004.

Yip remembers being relieved at the time. "I was quite happy, because now I could go everywhere fast," she says. "I fell out of my chair a couple of times, though."

Though clumsy on land, she was free and confident in the water and eagerly looked forward to the family's weekend outings to Geylang Bahru Swimming

Complex. An avid swimmer since five, she says: "Swimming is the one thing that has always made me happy. In water, there are no hindrances. In the pool, there is nothing I can't do."

That same year, a swimming coach working with the Singapore Disability Sports Council spotted 12-year-old Yip splashing around and recruited her for the council's sports programme. It changed her life.

First, she met athletes such as Goh, who drew her out of her shell. Second, she started entering international competitions and winning medals, giving her another boost.

In 2005, she brought home her first haul: two golds and a bronze from the World Wheelchair and Amputee Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. That taste of victory awakened a craving for more.

"I felt so proud that I could do something for the country," she says. Over the next three years, she went on to net 18 gold medals in international disability sports events in Asia and Europe, feats that cause even other athletes to blink.

Among them is swimmer Goh, who says she is impressed and inspired by Yip's drive. "Once she puts her mind to something, she gets what she wants."

Yip's greatest victory is possibly against her own body. When she started, her speciality was the front crawl, but weakening leg muscles forced her into relying on the backstroke, even for free-style swimming events. There are tricks around this, as former Olympic swimmer Ang Peng Siong taught her for the 2008 Paralympics. Twisting her torso relentlessly, she propelled herself 50m in less than a minute, setting a new world record and winning a gold.

It is possible that she is weaker now and losing tone in the trunk. "I can't do sit-ups without help. My left eye can't see as well," she admits.

Still, she and coach Yang are confident of her chances. She rattles off other activities she is keen to try in the next few years: "I want to try bungee jumping, like the one at Clarke Quay. I want to go snorkelling. I want to try parasailing."

Coming down to earth, she says with a sigh. "My mum probably won't let me." Her mother is proud of her can-do attitude. "She's truly independent. She doesn't bother us, she will do things on her own as much as she can."

Choked with emotion, she recalls Yip caring for her through a bout of illness two years ago, moving around on her hands and knees to bring her mother what she needed. "How can you describe a girl like that? She is so caring."

Yip's father is equally proud, not of her sporting achievements but of her emotional strength. Like his wife, he worries about their daughter's prospects. The \$150,000 she received from Singapore for her Paralympic feat has been carefully invested for her future.

"She's lucky to be born in the right place, in Singapore. In other places, I think she would suffer more. Here, at least the handicapped are looked after and given chances," he says.

Yip herself will not admit to any fears, only plans, for the future. She hopes to be a sports coach one day and to help other disabled athletes like herself.

"But right now, my nearest goal is to get ready for the Paralympics," she says. "I just want to do my best."

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the monday interview with Yip Pin Xiu

my life so far

'I don't need help getting into the water but I need some help to start because I can't grip the handle. My coach has to hold my hands at the right level. Once I actually start swimming, my mind goes blank. I just concentrate on going as fast as possible'

On competing

'Both my brothers are all-rounders, they do well in studies and sports. I want to follow in their footsteps... I love my parents. Apart from providing support and encouragement, they don't stress me out about my studies'

On her family



ST FILE PHOTO

Yip Pin Xiu (above), winning a gold at the Asean Para Games in Thailand in 2008, with (clockwise from left) brother Augustus, mum Margaret, Dad Chee Thiong and brother Alvin; and at age seven (right), in Zurich, Switzerland, on a holiday with the family.



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF YIP PIN XIU



Yip (left) when she was a few months old, and at six (below, with her mother), climbing on a statue of a rhinoceros in China.



'I'm excited, I've been wanting to do this. In 2008, even though I trained for five hours a day, I looked forward to every session. Even though I was physically tired, I was mentally happy'

On training for the 2012 Paralympics in London

'I think I'm lucky, because I can get around without help'

On her disability