

RIDING ON

Para-equestrienne **LAURENTIA TAN** did not let cerebral palsy and profound deafness stop her from becoming Singapore's first Paralympic medalist. She reveals her secrets to sporting success – endless practice, trusted teamwork, humour and a strong dose of determination.

The music started, but Laurentia Tan – perched on top of her horse, Ruben James II – could not hear it. She glanced ever so slightly towards the sidelines, where a permitted team member immediately signalled for her to start. For her, this was the easier part of the “Freestyle to Music” (or “kür”) event at the 2012 London Paralympics.

Laurentia then rode confidently into the arena, using permitted assistive devices like special looped reins, pacing her movements lightly, rhythmically. Despite her unstable muscle movements, she maintained precise control of Ruben James II, directing him to walk accurately sized circles or trot in a serpentine pattern.

Knowing when to finish, however, was the toughest part. “I was not able



to hear the music at all, let alone hear when the music was trailing off," says Laurentia, 33, who competed under Grade 1-A (athletes whose severe disability has the greatest impact on their ability to ride). "I would have loved to have a visual aid, like a live orchestra or flashing lights, so that I could have 'seen' the music. But that was not possible."

Instead, all Laurentia could rely on was her well-honed understanding of her horse. "From his steps and rhythm, I could work out whether we were ahead of or lagging behind the music." Laurentia did well, scoring 79,000 to finish behind Britain's Sophie Christiansen, and ahead of Ireland's Helen Kearney. That silver medal was her second at the London Paralympics. Earlier, she had won bronze in the individual championship test. With the addition of these two medals, Laurentia became Singapore's most bemedalled Paralympian. In February this year, she was crowned *The Straits Times* Athlete of the Year for 2012 for her achievements in London.

Laurentia first made history – and shot to international fame – at the 2008 Beijing Paralympics. Riding Harvey (also known as "Nothing to Lose"), a 20-year-old chestnut gelding, she became Singapore's first Paralympic medallist

when she came in third in the individual championship event at the Hong Kong Olympic Equestrian Centre in Shatin. It was also Asia's first Paralympic equestrian medal. Later, she also won a bronze in the individual freestyle test. For her extraordinary achievements that year, she was named as one of Singapore's most outstanding athletes and conferred the Pingat Bakti Masyarakat (Public Service Medal) by President S. R. Nathan.

Laurentia's sporting successes are remarkable, considering how she had developed cerebral palsy and profound deafness shortly after birth. At that time, doctors declared her "spastic", and informed her parents that she would probably not be able to walk or talk. They also recommended that she be institutionalised. Yet today, Laurentia is fiercely independent. She lip-reads, walks unaided, and drives to and from Kent (about 100km away from her home in Surrey) four times a week for training. It takes six hours for Laurentia to drive to her training sessions in Kent, groom and tack up the horse, train, untack the horse, and drive home. She rides in all weathers, through rain, sun, wind and hail – but she says: "It never feels like hard work."

It has been five years since her Paralympic breakthrough in 2008. But Laurentia's deep-seated passion for the sport is evident. "On a horse, I have the energy and freedom of movement that my own legs cannot give me," Laurentia says emphatically. "Through riding my horses, it has given me

inspiration that anything is possible in life. While there are times when things may not go well, it is how one responds to or approaches a problem that really counts. Often, there are many ways to solve a problem. In a way, riding has enabled me to 'fly'."

YOUTHFUL DETERMINATION

When Laurentia was three, she moved to the United Kingdom with her parents – Anselm and Jannie Tan – and an elder brother, Ephraim. The family relocated because of Anselm's business commitments and eventually stayed on because England had better medical and specialist educational support facilities for Laurentia.

Growing up, Laurentia struggled with her physical disabilities. Being deaf, she missed out on conversations with family and friends, even though everyone around her willingly repeated their sentences for her benefit. Her condition also meant that she was always physically slower than her friends, and she fell over so often and sustained

so many minor injuries that her teachers and the school nurse nicknamed her "Trouble".

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At five years old, upon the advice of her physiotherapist, her parents arranged for her to take up horse riding at the Diamond Centre for Disabled Riders in London. "I couldn't stay upright, so two people had to hold me in a sitting position on each side of the pony as a third person led the way," reminisces Laurentia. "I remember that first ride as being a very bouncy one and I absolutely loved the experience!"

For the next few years, Laurentia would find riding extremely therapeutic. She says: "It helps with my balance, stamina and coordination while strengthening my core muscles. My posture and walk also improved over time." Gradually, so did her self-esteem.

Even in the face of physical challenges, a young Laurentia always strived to do everything that able-bodied children could. "I was always running around with my friends in the playground, and copying their cartwheels and rollovers," she laughs. "I even asked for roller skates and everyone laughed saying I would never be able to balance properly. But my response to that was: "How will we know I can't do it, unless I try...?"

It was with this mindset that she decided to pursue equestrian dressage

in 2005. By then, she had completed her A-level at the Mary Hare Grammar School, a boarding school for the deaf, graduated from Oxford Brookes University with an honours degree in hospitality management and tourism, and was working as a mental health worker. She says: "I had stopped riding to concentrate on university and my job, but I missed the sport terribly."

FINDING HARMONY IN TEAMWORK

So Laurentia returned to the Diamond Centre for Disabled Riders, where she met her coach, Heather "Penny" Pegrum. In 2006, she participated in dressage competitions at her coach's encouragement.

By the end of that year, she had progressed to the Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) Nationals. Then in 2007, the Riding for the Disability Association (RDA) Singapore invited Laurentia to join the Singapore team for the World Para Dressage Championships. It was also a qualifier for the 2008 Beijing Paralympics.

Over the years, Laurentia has trained with different horses, mostly borrowed. There was the older and more gentlemanly Harvey; a sensitive but reassuring Ruben James II; as well as Laurentia's own horse, a younger and playful Rubin (or "Redcliff"). She says: "In a way, having a partner in a horse is the challenge. Like people, horses have their own personalities and temperaments. But I have to learn to perform in harmony with all of them."

Laurentia remembers an instance at the World Para Dressage Championships in July 2007, when she felt hesitant and unsure in the arena. "I had been training with Harvey for only three months then, and it was the first international competition for the both of us. Then I remembered that in training, he had shown me I could do it." That worked, and the pair performed wonderfully. In both her team and individual tests, she achieved at least a 63%. She was placed fourth in a field of 18 riders with a best score of 67.94%.

The high scores kick-started Laurentia's para-equestrian career. In June 2008, preparations for the Beijing Paralympics got more intense, and Laurentia quit her job as a mental health worker to ride full-time, training with Penny and physiotherapist Anthea Pell.

Beyond working in partnership with her horses, Laurentia believes that the teamwork extends to her support team of coaches, vets, grooms,

physiotherapists, British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters and even horse owners. "Dressage is not just about the partnership between the horse and rider. In equestrian especially, there is also a large support team. Through my trainings, I have learned the importance of communication and trust in partnership and teamwork."

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

These days, Laurentia spends most of her time training in England, where she still lives, as well as in Germany, where some of the horses are based. She also participates in various regional, national and international competitions, mostly held in Europe.

"Before any big event or competition, I would ride two or three times nearly every day," she says. "Even when I'm not riding, I would be busy in the gym, doing physiotherapy exercises and stretches. I still have to do this every day to help me to be more supple and balance better on the horse." But while there have been times when Laurentia was truly exhausted by her training sessions, she confesses

to enjoying the mental challenges and physical agility of the sport too much to give up.

The challenge of competition enthralled her. "In the arena, anything can happen and I have to try to manage the situation and do the best I can under any circumstances. I don't think it is possible to achieve our greatest potential without pushing ourselves. I'm always trying to improve my equestrian skills and scores, and be a better rider."

Those around Laurentia have observed in her a perfectionist streak. She can spend hours just trying to perform a certain movement down pat. "There are frustrating moments, of course. But I find that practice, practice and more practice can usually help make it better." It is this perseverance to practise till perfection is achieved that has propelled Laurentia into the international limelight.

For Laurentia, winning the first Paralympic medal for Singapore was not only a personal achievement. She saw it as a strong example of what people with disabilities can achieve if given the right opportunities. "I am very lucky to be able to do what I love," she says, adding that she is working

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to raise awareness of the sport through talks in schools and corporations. She adds: "My achievements in equestrian have shown me that dreams and opportunities come in disguise. You will never know where things may lead, so it is important to focus on the things that you enjoy and follow your dreams."

VALUES

Perseverance • Tenacity • Teamwork • Harmony

REFLECTION

1. She may look fragile, but Laurentia has proven her strength over many years. She has overcome adversity to define herself as a resilient Paralympian athlete. Have you struggled with adversity in your life? What resources did you draw upon to rise above the circumstances? What lessons did you learn during the experience? Have you counselled someone who has been in need – a colleague, friend or family member who needed guidance or moral support? How did you show your care and encouragement? How would you describe yourself as a mentor or a leader?
2. "In the arena, anything can happen and I have to try to manage the situation and do the best I can under any circumstances," Laurentia says. Have you been in a situation where your team has given its best but has not been able to achieve the desired outcome? How did you manage your own frustration or disappointment? As a team leader, how did you motivate your team to stay focused? How did you manage the criticism or expectations of management?

PRIDE OF THE NATION

What makes us proud? Valour in struggle. Grace in triumph. The unexpected victory. A commitment of will in the face of great adversity. An ordinary person doing something extraordinary and inspiring us to believe that we can, too. These three individuals made us proud as they rose to conquer – a mountain, a long-standing national record and an Olympic standard.