

IN HER ELEMENT

Para-swimmer **YIP PIN XIU** made sports history when she clinched gold for Singapore at the 2008 Beijing Paralympics. But this remarkable victory belies a debilitating and deteriorating condition that threatens her future in sports. Still, the optimistic 21-year-old believes in doing her best to overcome all odds.

When Yip Pin Xiu slips from her wheelchair into the water, she does it like it is the most natural thing in the world. In the pool, she propels effortlessly through the water with each forceful backstroke.

"It may sound clichéd, but I truly belong in the water. I can walk, do handstands and perform somersaults. It is only in the water that I can move freely and do whatever anyone else can do," says Pin Xiu, who was diagnosed with hereditary sensorimotor neuropathy when she was just two, after an aunt noticed that she could not seem to flex her ankles.

A form of muscular dystrophy, the condition causes nerve functions and muscles to progressively deteriorate over time. Since Pin Xiu was 13, she has



been wheelchair-bound. Now 21, she is gradually losing control of motor skills in her wrist and grip. The vision in her left eye is blurring.

It is no wonder she finds reprieve in the water. Unlike able-bodied swimmers, Pin Xiu swims with her head tilted back and submerged to allow her hips to be raised. This is done to reduce the drag caused by her limp legs. As she cannot catch the optimum amount of water in her clenched fists to swim efficiently, she improvises by increasing the speed of her stroke. When turning in the water, she swivels 180-degrees on her back. She adds: "Every time my condition deteriorates, I have to put in more hours in training and go to more physiotherapy sessions."

Yet Pin Xiu never lets this get her down. In 2008, she won Singapore's first Olympic-level gold medal in the women's 50m backstroke at the Beijing Paralympics. With a time of 58.75s, she beat the runner-up by more than seven seconds and seven metres. She also won silver in the 50m freestyle, and set two world records at the heats for both events. "With this, I've proven to myself – and fellow Singaporeans – that nothing is impossible once you've set your heart on it." Over the

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years, she has earned many more medals, all displayed prominently in her Serangoon home.

At the interview, Pin Xiu – who is studying social sciences at Singapore Management University (SMU) – appears relaxed. She gleefully announces that her first-year examinations are just over and that she "has never studied so hard!" She chimes: "And I'm leaving for Bangkok next week for a shopping trip!" Like any other sociable young adult, she is constantly checking her phone for WhatsApp messages from friends. Talk to her, and her cheerful, confident disposition shines through. But she has not always been this way.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE - UNDERWATER

Pin Xiu's first – and impromptu – swimming lesson was at Kallang Swimming Complex, where her two elder brothers were taking swimming lessons. She may have been just five years old then, but she remembers the details vividly. "I got bored playing at the baby pool, so I asked my mother to let me join the beginner's class."

At that age, Pin Xiu could still walk. In fact, she was "just like any other

able-bodied kid". So, she was allowed to join the class. "The first time I swam, I didn't even have a swimming costume! I just went into the water in a dress," laughs Pin Xiu. "It was so fun. We did bunny hops and walked sideways like crabs in the pool."

Growing up, Pin Xiu's parents – engineering firm partner Yip Chee Khiong and Singapore Airlines senior officer Margaret Chong – never gave her any special care. "If I fell down, I had to learn to pick myself up. They didn't believe in mollycoddling me just because of my condition," says Pin Xiu. "They were also fair." Whatever her brothers – Alvin, 27; Augustus, 25 – received in terms of toys, enrichment classes and affection, she would get too. "If they went on roller coaster rides, I got to go, too."

But as her mobility deteriorated, so did her social acceptance at school. "In primary school, I was bullied because I was different from the rest of my classmates. This caused me to be very diffident and introverted," reveals Pin Xiu, who found comfort in swimming. "When I'm underwater, I cannot hear a thing so it feels really peaceful."

In early 2004, when Pin Xiu was 12 years old, she was talent-spotted by Danny Ong, a sports volunteer from Singapore Disability Sports Council. He saw that the girl could not only catch up with, but also outpace, her able-bodied peers in the water. Pin Xiu entered the National Junior Championships a few months later, emerging with gold medals in all six events she took part in.

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"After that, I started to train with the elite team. It was the first time I found friends and felt accepted," shares Pin Xiu. "Slowly, I gained more confidence and opened up more easily to people." One of her closest confidantes today is fellow Paralympic swimmer, Theresa Goh. "Theresa makes trainings fun," says Pin Xiu cheerfully. "We're both foodies, so we enjoy trying out new cafés and restaurants, like Wall St Bistro on Figaro Street."

LEARNING ABOUT RESPECT

Pin Xiu lost the ability to walk when she started Secondary One at Bendemeer Secondary School. She adapted to it without much fuss. "I was happy to get a wheelchair because that meant I would finally be able to catch up with the rest of my friends," she says.

For the next three years, Pin Xiu juggled training with studies. “Whenever I was preparing for a competition, I would swim 12 times a week. Each pool session was two hours and would lead to a one-and-a-half-hour gym workout,” says Pin Xiu. “My days were mostly divided into school, swimming, gym and physiotherapy sessions.”

She concedes that those early morning training sessions taught her much. “When I was younger, I used to be late for 6.30 a.m. trainings. But over time, I grew to understand that punctuality has a lot to do with respect,” she says. “I have to respect my coach by turning up on time.”

The tough training yielded results. In 2005, she participated in the Asia Paralympics Swimming Championship, winning two gold medals. Her first international competition was the World Wheelchair and Amputee Games the same year, where she won two gold medals and a bronze. In 2006, she received four gold medals at the DSE Long Course Swimming Championships. In 2007, she won three gold medals at the Japan Paralympic Swimming Championships and four gold medals at the World Wheelchair and Amputee Games.

STEELY RESOLVE

2008 was, in Pin Xiu’s own words, “spectacular”. She clocked a world and Paralympic record time of 57.62 seconds during the heats of the 50m backstroke for S3, one of the categories of disabilities – which includes muscular dystrophy – in the Beijing 2008 Paralympics. “That was when things started getting exciting,” Pin Xiu recalls. “I felt then that I had a real shot at winning, so I trained extra hard. It was also my O-level year, and I wasn’t in school much.”

Instead, she trained aggressively with her coach, former Olympian Ang Peng Siong. “Uncle Peng Siong knew exactly how he wanted me to train, so I felt confident following his instructions.” Pin Xiu also relied heavily on the expertise of her support team, which included a doctor, nutritionist, physiotherapist and psychologist.

Training was so intensive that Pin Xiu did not catch a movie that entire year. But no matter how tough it got, Pin Xiu rarely entertained negative thoughts. Neither did she feel like giving up. “Even if I did, it would just be a thought bubble that pops quite quickly, usually right after training ends,” she laughs. “There were low moments, but I tend to forget about unhappy things.”

What she does remember are the wonderful moments of her Beijing Paralympics experience. “To help us relax before the competition, Uncle



Peng Siong brought Theresa – who was also competing – and me, as well as the entire support team of seven people, to the Great Wall of China, “she reminisces. “It wasn’t the most accessible of places, but everyone rallied around to push us up the Great Wall – there were a lot of laughs!”

After the Beijing Paralympics, Pin Xiu resolved to focus on her studies. “I had such horrible results for my O-level that I wanted to start my first year in Republic Polytechnic right and achieve results in another part of my life.” For the next 18 months, she reduced her swim training to just thrice weekly.

With the extra time, she worked towards a diploma in the Sports and Exercise Sciences course. “I chose the course because my Beijing Paralympics experience helped me to understand how important a good support team is to an athlete,” she explains. “From swimming, I know that if I’m positive and passionate about something, I will be able to do it well.”

So, Pin Xiu used the same level of determination in her swim training and applied it to her studies. “As a child, I used to get distracted by the television.

But now, I have no problems staying off the television to concentrate on my studies.” She graduated with merit in early 2012. She was even picked to be the polytechnic’s back-up valedictorian.

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A PERSONAL BEST

During her study break, Pin Xiu competed in smaller competitions like the 2009 ASEAN Para Games, the 2010 IPC Swimming World Championships and the 2011 Pan Pacific Para-Swimming Championships. She emerged the winner in all the events.

Pin Xiu returned to serious training for the 2012 London Paralympics, but she missed out on a medal when she finished fourth in the 100m freestyle. Shrugging off the recent loss, she says: “If I put in my all and I lose, I’m fine with it. But if I don’t put in any effort, and I win, I wouldn’t feel so great.” She adds that she is more concerned about achieving a personal best instead of competing with others. “I get more satisfaction from pushing myself to the limit so I always try hard to improve my timings.”

But time is not on Pin Xiu’s side. Younger athletes are catching up fast. Her future in sports is also uncertain because of her degenerative condition. This is a fact that Pin Xiu has come to accept, and she does not dwell upon it. “I know what to expect, since I’ve already gone through the experience of

losing my ability to walk.”

So, Pin Xiu does not worry about what is beyond her control. “I know that my time in swimming is limited, but I don’t want to spend my life swimming anyway. I want to try other things.” Recently, she has taken up equestrian sport at the Riding for the Disabled Association of Singapore (RDA). “I love horses,” she says. “Even though I fell off my horse last week, I think I will continue.”

For now, it seems that Pin Xiu is content to give her all in both sport and school. Pin Xiu says: “I still believe in having a positive attitude and pushing myself to the limit.” And that is a characteristic of Pin Xiu that will not change – ever.

VALUES

Determination • Positivity • Respect

REFLECTION

1. To win Singapore’s first gold medal in the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing, swimmer Pin Xiu focused on her capabilities instead of her deteriorating physical condition. What lessons can you draw from Pin Xiu’s indomitability and resolve in the face of intensifying adversity?
2. Through swimming, Pin Xiu learned that staying positive and passionate would help her achieve her goals. Do you embrace this philosophy in life? How do you approach changing circumstances and setbacks?