

Paralympian beats the odds to set world record

Olivia Ho

Yip Pin Xiu is swimming against time – in more ways than one.

The Paralympian athlete chalked up a fresh victory against time when she broke a world record at the Asean Para Games (APG) last month, and snagged a gold medal.

But swimming is also her last bulwark in the slow war that time is waging on her body, as muscle after muscle degenerates.

Yip, who turned 24 yesterday, was born with muscular dystrophy, a disorder that gradually causes her muscles to lose their ability to function.

As a child, she could walk but it was “cumbersome”. She had leg braces from the age of two, and needed a wheelchair at 12. Classmates taunted her for her condition, hurling stapler bullets and eraser ends at her.

Water was her sanctuary. She remembers how, aged five, she saw her older brothers take swimming lessons and decided to get into the pool – denim dress and all. “In the water, I felt like a normal person,” she said. “I could do everything that everyone else could.”

Yip started swimming competitively at the age of 12. She went on to win Singapore’s first Paralympic gold medal in Beijing in 2008.

At the APG in Singapore last month, she set a new world record in the women’s 50m backstroke S2 with a time of 1min 1.61sec, eclipsing Chinese swimmer Feng Yazhu’s mark of 1:03.00 set in 2012.

Para-swimming events are classified S1 to S10 for physical disability, with S1 for athletes with the most severe disabilities. Yip, an S2 swimmer, set the record in an S5 race against competitors three classes more mobile than her.

She began her competitive career as an S5 swimmer, but the weaken-



Paralympic gold medallist Yip says disabled athletes “can inspire many different groups of people – not just the disabled”. ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

ing of her body led her to move down three classes.

The deterioration manifests itself in small, mundane things. “Four years ago, I could pick up coins from the floor. I could hold keys. I can’t any more.”

Swimming helps to strengthen her unaffected muscles and slow the progress of the disease, but there is a distant possibility that one day even swimming could become too difficult for her body.

“That would be depressing,” said Yip. “I love the water so much.”

“But I don’t think about it. Worrying would only make me notice what is disappearing more.”

Instead, she prefers to channel her energy into being an ambassador for the disabled to Singapore, and for Singapore to the sporting world. “It is part of my duty to make people more aware that to be disabled is not to be unable,” she said. “What I like is that people don’t just

see us as disabled athletes any more. We can inspire many different groups of people – not just the disabled, (but) everybody.”

She dreams of playing a role in strategising sports development in Singapore. “I want to make Singapore more progressive, with less discrimination against not just the disabled but all minorities.”

The next mountain she has to climb is the Rio 2016 Paralympics.

The Singapore Management University social sciences undergraduate has taken a nine-month leave of absence to prepare. “I don’t feel right about not putting 100 per cent into what I do,” she said.

She is gunning to place in the top three at least, once more putting Singapore on the sporting map. “I like to think we are like chilli padis,” she said. “We are small, but as a nation, we are super powerful.”

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