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Yip Pin Xiu, who suffers from muscular dystrophy, will compete in the 50m and 100m freestyle (S3) at the London Paralympics 2012.

# No fear for the future

**Paralympic swimmer Yip chooses to be optimistic as 'worrying makes things bad'**

Chan U-Gen

By the time the Rio Olympics arrive in four years, Yip Pin Xiu cannot be sure if she will still be able to brush her hair, button her clothes or write with a pen.

For the Singapore swimmer who will compete at the London Paralympics on Friday suffers from muscular dystrophy, a disease which gradually weakens muscles.

Athletes live by the clock. Training plans and competition goals are set within time periods. But Yip's is a cruel wait.

At the 2008 Beijing Games, where she became the nation's first Paralympics gold-medallist when she won the 50m backstroke, she remembers being able to pick up coins from the ground.

Today, the 20-year-old can no longer do that, as her fingers' grip has weakened.

The strength of her core muscles has also deteriorated. She weighed 48kg in Beijing and dropped drastically to 38kg only a year later.

But, after going through six months of intensive bulking up exercises, she now weighs 42kg.

Watching Yip twirl around on her wheelchair is like witnessing a ballerina in motion. And she gets all excited as she texts messages to her friends, punching the buttons on her mobile phone with only her left thumb and knuckles.

She manages to mask the severity of her physical condition with contagious enthusiasm.

She said: "I take things day by day. I'm not worrying about it. Even if I do, there is nothing I can do. So I just don't worry about it.

Worrying makes things bad. It brings a lot of negativity."

She sees four doctors. Three said her body's condition, and eyesight, will slowly worsen. One believes that the deterioration will stop this year, when she reaches 20.

Yip chooses to be optimistic, saying: "I choose to believe her. Maybe it's slowing down. But I really can't tell. It's such a day by day thing."

The former Republic Polytechnic (RP) sports science student's sunny disposition has helped soothe the anxieties of her loved ones.

Said her mother Margaret, 57, a senior officer at Singapore International Airlines: "Initially, I was worried about how she would get on in society.

"Now, we are at ease because she blends in."

Recalling the times when her daughter first complained about a pain in her right foot as a two-year-old, and when she was first put in a wheelchair in upper primary school, the mother said: "When I think of the past, it still hurts.

"At Primary Four and Five, I saw her getting weaker. She started holding on to walls or her friends' shoulders when she walked."

## WHAT IS MUSCULAR DYSTROPHY?

Muscular dystrophy is a group of genetic disorders that involves loss of muscle tissue, which becomes worse over time.

Those affected have incorrect or missing information in their genes, preventing their bodies from making the proteins they need for healthy muscles.

Most forms of the disease are

seen in early childhood but some may also affect adults, not appearing until middle age or later.

Then, Yip found a place where the barriers on land could not reach her - in the water.

Soon, swimming became more than just an escape. It became a way of life and, more importantly, helped delay the ravages of muscular dystrophy.

She has been told that the more active she stays, the more likely her muscles will be resistant to decay.

Said Dr Cormac O'Muircheartaigh, the medical director of the Singapore Sports Institute: "The progression (of the disease) has been small. She does swimming, strength conditioning and physiotherapy to maintain strength and function.

"In the last four years, it's been a slow progress, but only time will tell whether there is further degeneration."

For now, Yip has a more pressing task ahead in the 50m and 100m freestyle (S3). Her pet 50m backstroke event will not be featured.

She may not repeat her one gold and one silver (50m free) haul at Beijing but the pre-competition training for the Games, which involves seven sessions a week, is enough reward.

She said: "I enjoy training be-

## Optimism

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YIP PIN XIU chooses to believe the one doctor (out of four) who says that her muscles will stop deteriorating this year

## Enjoyable

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After London, the Singapore Management University student who started school last week has a bigger problem to worry about - calculus.

Said the back-up valedictorian of RP: "I've never liked maths since primary three and I don't like calculus.

"But, at least, I have some seniors offering to tutor me. I might fail calculus, but I'll try my best.

"I'm a bit of a perfectionist. I have to give my best in whatever I do. If I don't, I will regret it."

So, whether in a mathematics class or in the pool, this fine young woman continues her search for answers and excellence.

Perhaps she will find it in medals at the London Aquatic Centre, or maybe when she makes an appearance at Rio 2016.

Only time will tell.

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