

Commentary

Champion's spirit in a faltering body

Para-swimmer Yip Pin Xiu is a symbol of what is possible in the pool and beyond



Rohit Brijnath

Blisters bleed and muscles tear, ribs fracture and ankles swell. The body is the athlete's instrument and it is rarely obedient. Still, athletes persist through pain and perform through hardship and if we rightfully insist this is toughness, and bravery, and inspiring, then what words are left for Yip Pin Xiu?

Because unlike blisters that heal or muscles that mend, her body does not. Because Singapore's startling swimmer has assembled a remarkable body of athletic work with a body that every year is increasingly reluctant to work for her.

Yip, who has muscular dystrophy, can no longer hold the rail with her hands before the start of a race, can no longer pick up small coins, can no longer do crunches, can no

longer manipulate the small locks in toilets. But, still, this is what she can do: Break a world record for speed in the water in December.

Pin Xiu means "good character" but in truth she is a strong one for it is her resilient mind which helps her body travel to astonishing places. Even yesterday, on a day of dresses and make-up, she woke at 5.30am and swam 40 lengths. She has not become fast by fluke but by fortitude.

Life has pushed Yip around but she has pushed back and it takes valour not to be a victim. When she was a child, her mother, Margaret, with a desperation we understand, took her to allopathic doctors and tried Chinese medicine and even faith healers, till Yip told her, "It's OK, let's not waste money, let's not do this any more". She accepted her condition was incurable. She was also around seven years old.

All of us choose to meet life differently and Yip has preferred purpose to protestation. Margaret speaks of a "self-driven" child who wanted to pack her own bag and craved independence. "She'd tell me, Mum, don't worry about me."

Her coach, Mick Massey, praises

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her "single-mindedness" and illustrates it through an anecdote. Recently, after three repetitions of a tough set, he told Yip "great job" and asked her to warm down. In reply this slight figure from the water squeaked: "Can we go again?"

Quite simply, a young woman with a large appetite for life is redefining for a small nation what is possible in sport but also beyond. In a continent still struggling to relate to disabled people, she is our teacher of sorts. She cannot grip a glass yet she seizes opportunity. If you look at her and merely see a girl in a wheelchair then you are not looking properly. She is – as 2015



Flanked by members of her family on stage (from left) her brother Alvin Yip, sister-in-law Ang Sioh Hoon, mother Margaret Chong, father Yip Chee Khiong, Pin Xiu holds the coveted winged trophy yesterday. She was only seven years old when she accepted that her condition, muscular dystrophy, was incurable. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

proved – among the most able people we have on this island.

All this is why she is The Straits Times Athlete of the Year for it is an award that recognises achievement but knitted with inspiration. We don't just want sport to entertain us, we want it to shake us, move us, transform us. We don't just want our athletes to challenge physical boundaries but also the way we think. Each of our nominees did this, but she just that little bit more.

Athletes like Yip set out to win titles, not awards, but if they win enough of the first they are celebrated with the second. The title tells them they are better than their specific breed, this award tells

them they are the finest among their wider peers. Both must be earned.

The trophy she took home has wings on it and it resembles the figure of Nike, who is the goddess of victory. It is appropriate, for Yip won a race but, more tellingly, respect from a new audience. In her first major competition at home she broke her first world record since 2009. You might call it coincidence, or magic, or an athlete making a point. To believe she could go fast they had to see her go fast.

Yesterday Yip was the Athlete of the Year. Today she is an athlete trying to be better than yesterday

and so she will awake at 5.30am, get ready and summon a taxi. She will open the door, slide from her wheelchair onto the back seat and ask the taxi driver to stow her chair. She will reach the pool at 6.30am and swim one length, then another, using her mind to command her body.

If you hang around at the OCBC Aquatic Centre you might stumble upon her. Say hello and have a chat. She might tell you, as she told me recently, that "swimming makes me feel alive". I forgot to tell her that day that it's athletes like her who keep sport alive.

rohitt@sph.com.sg