

2016 Paralympic Games: Singapore's medallists

# RAISING SWIM CHAMPS

The parents of medal-winning Paralympic swimmers Yip Pin Xiu and Theresa Goh revelled in their daughters' feats in Rio. But at the heart of their success were common links to pain. **Joan Chew** tells their stories.

## Theresa Goh: Family's heartbreak soothed by her discovery of freedom and speed in water

It was what the doctors could not say about the infant, rather than what they could say, that caused her anxious parents far more anguish than anything else in the emerging crisis.

The baby girl, born two months premature, had been diagnosed with spina bifida, a neural tube defect in which the backbone protecting the spinal cord does not close as it should, causing a range of physical limitations.

Those were the harrowing moments that confronted Bernard Goh and his wife, Rose Mok, after the arrival of their first-born, Theresa, back in 1987.

There were the questions that had no immediate definitive answers for the couple: How severe was the physical disability? Would there be any allied intellectual hurdles? Could the nerve tissue be repaired? Would she need surgery? And what were the baby's long-term prospects?

Recalled Bernard: "We were shocked and didn't know where to turn in order to learn about spina bifida, since there was no Internet then."

His wife teared up when this topic was raised, and turned away to compose herself.

The first-time parents' heartbreak was compounded because, they said, doctors were not keen to take up Theresa's case, and she was transferred from one hospital to another.

The family finally found a neurosurgeon who operated on the baby when she was four months old, closing the opening in her back, which had not fused as normal. However, defining the full extent of her medical condition was slow and - literally and metaphorically - extremely painful.

When she was about four, she was asleep in her cot in the living room when both parents heard a loud snapping sound. They realised that she had broken her thigh bone after her leg became caught between the railings of her cot.

By the time Theresa was seven, she had already endured 10 orthopaedic operations, some to correct the alignment of both club feet as well as to alleviate webbed fingers.

"Every bout of surgery she had was difficult for her, and for us. It was difficult for her to get used to injections," recalled Bernard at the Windsor Barra Hotel in Rio de Janeiro during the Paralympics.

Defining the course of their daughter's life was, in no small measure, her indomitable will. Despite being paralysed from the waist down and suffering from urinary and bowel dysfunction, she placed no limitations on her physical boundaries and - crucially - her parents supported her all the way.

When she was nine and wearing leg braces, Theresa asked her parents for permission to climb up a playground structure about three metres high. They did not have the heart to say no, but watched her like a hawk as she made her way up on her own, fuelled by the raw courage. "It is this freedom we gave her," said Bernard, "that boosted her confidence over the years."

The family grew, with the arrival of a sister and brother for Theresa. And despite frequent hospital trips for their eldest child, the parents made sure she was not spared punishment when she misbehaved.

"We tried not to differentiate be-

tween the three of them (in our parenting style). We helped her, but did not give in to her just because of her disability," Rose said firmly.

Like most children, Theresa loved being put in the water, observed her mother. There was also the realisation that she needed to work on her upper body strength to compensate for her lower limbs.

When she was five, her father taught her a simple approach to the breaststroke which, not surprisingly, is her pet event. She began competing at 12 after being spotted by a sports volunteer at a public pool.

Theresa learnt the rules of competition the hard way when she was disqualified at a local swim meet after failing to touch the wall with both hands at both ends of the pool, recalled Bernard.

He and his wife firmly advocate the value of sport, especially for children with special needs. Bernard said: "Every child, able-bodied or disabled, has his or her unique strengths."

"With sports, (special-needs children) get more opportunities to meet up with friends and keep themselves busy. It really helps them socially, emotionally and mentally."

While Theresa dabbled in other sports like wheelchair racing, archery and powerlifting over the years, an environment felt more like home to her than the swimming pool.

She set her first world record at 15 and another at 19. The three-time Singapore Disability Sports Council's Sportswoman of the Year is also the country's most decorated Asean Para Games athlete with 27 golds.

Theresa also became the first swimmer from Singapore to compete at the Paralympics, in Athens in 2004.

In 2007, deciding she could not juggle her polytechnic course and swim training, she dropped out to focus on training full-time for the Beijing Paralympics.

It was a fraught decision, said her mother, revealing that it was "very difficult" for them, as parents, to agree to it. They eventually relented, and let her quit school to concentrate on training.

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BERNARD GOH, who introduced his daughter to the fundamentals of the breaststroke when she was five.

### CHILDREN WITH DIFFERENT NEEDS

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ROSE MOK, Theresa's mother, on how she and her husband dealt with the challenge of raising two-able bodied children alongside their eldest sibling who suffers with spina bifida.

This photograph, taken in 2012, shows Bernard Goh with (from left) his daughter Maria, wife Rose and multiple Paralympian Theresa. The sisters have another sibling, a brother, Nicholas. ST FILE PHOTO.



Even at the tender age of three, Theresa was already showing her delight at the freedom of being in a swimming pool. Two years later, her father introduced her to the breaststroke, the event in which she won a bronze in Rio. PHOTO: COURTESY OF BERNARD GOH



Top: Singapore para-swimming stars Theresa Goh (left) and Yip Pin Xiu at the Games Village in Rio. They are close friends both in and away from the water. Goh is a four-time Paralympian whose perseverance finally paid off when she won a bronze in the 100m breaststroke S84 last Sunday night. PHOTO: SPORT SINGAPORE

Above: Yip Pin Xiu celebrating with her parents Chee Khiong and Margaret after winning the 50m backstroke S2 on Thursday evening. The 24-year-old is Singapore's most successful Paralympian with three golds and one silver from three Games outings. ST PHOTO: JOAN CHEW

### ST Live

Q&A session tonight

Have something to ask Yip Pin Xiu?

The 2016 Paralympic double gold medalist is taking over The Straits Times' Twitter account from Rio for a live Q&A session.

Tweet your question to @STCom using the hashtag #STaskPX

Sept 18, Sunday, 6.30pm-7.30pm

www.twitter.com/STcom

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Theresa Goh's parents on raising special-needs children. http://str.sg/4Gc

### INITIAL WORRIES

I was worried about her future and about things such as whether people would want to make friends with her. The doctor advised us to let her be active to remain mobile for as long as possible.

MARGARET CHONG, Pin Xiu's mother, on her thoughts when the toddler was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy.

### THOUGHTFUL BEHAVIOUR

I rushed from the airport to visit my wife and newborn and saw that Pin Xiu was still there even though she had morning training in a few hours' time."

ALVIN YIP, the swimmer's oldest brother, on how he kept his wife company despite her hectic schedule.



## Yip Pin Xiu: Weak muscles but strong will spurs independence and journey to the top

Para-swimmer Yip Pin Xiu's parents were 15 minutes late for the interview.

Apologising, Margaret Chong said she and her husband, Yip Chee Khiong, had been picking out Havam Flip-flops from a shopping mall in Rio.

They were bringing home the popular Brazilian footwear brand for family members, though not for their only daughter, 24-year-old Pin Xiu.

The couple both 61, were in Rio where they watched her compete in last Thursday's (Friday morning, Singapore time) 50m backstroke S2 event, where she became the first Singaporean to win multiple gold medals at the same Games.

Dad, a businessman, recalled how it was Pin Xiu's inability to keep a pair of flip-flops on her feet that was the first hint something was amiss. At two, the toddler was unable to grip the straps with her toes or flex her foot fully.

Pin Xiu was taken to a doctor, and had surgery to release what were thought to be tight tendons, but the doctor noticed that her muscles did not seem to be growing even after the cast had been removed.

Medical tests confirmed she had muscular dystrophy, a genetic muscle-wasting illness, and that there was no cure.

Tears still well up in Mum's eyes now as she recalls how upset she was when they were told the news.

"I was worried about her future and about things such as whether people would want to make friends with her," she said.

The doctor advised us to let her be active to remain mobile for as long as possible."

Looking back now, their fears were unfounded, said Margaret, a senior officer with Singapore Airlines.

Pin Xiu has a group of close friends who are athletes and she is as independent as any able-bodied person, even as her condition continues to deteriorate.

Perhaps the water called to her as a kinder place than land. In any case, at age five, she asked for lessons after watching her two older brothers learn their strokes in the pool. Alvin, 31, now works in financial services and is an engineer.

Alvin said his sister is "extremely thoughtful", recalling how she made time to accompany his pregnant wife to hospital daily in June when he was overseas.

"We knew she was tired from her training twice a day, but she still went anyway, which helped put my wife at ease," he said.

"I rushed from the airport to visit my wife and newborn and saw that Pin Xiu was still there even though she had morning training in a few hours' time."

Sunday mornings became about family time at the pool at the Kalang Bahru Swimming Complex. It was here that the future champion first tasted failure - she could not complete a swim test, at half the distance done by others, in the stipulated time. Disappointed, she wept.

But still, she pressed on. When the complex was closed for renovation, she continued lessons at Jalan Besar, where a sports volunteer spotted her talent. A few months later, she was entered in the national junior para championships, where she won gold in all of her six events.

At four, she needed an ankle-foot orthotic brace to assist her with walking. By 12, she had to hold on to the wall or a friend's shoulder to steady herself while walking with the brace.

By the time she enrolled in Bendemeer Secondary School, she was in a wheelchair.

The family is grateful that she was well taken care of in school, with

teachers giving her access to a staff toilet that was bigger and could accommodate her wheelchair.

The reigning Straits Times' Athlete of the Year has said in past interviews that she was bullied in school, but her mother could only remember the kindness of classmates who helped carry her and her wheelchair up the stairs to class.

The Yips never thought as far ahead as the Paralympics. But they knew she had something special.

When Pin Xiu won the 100m backstroke S2 on Sept 9, she set two world records in the process.

She had also won the nation's first Paralympic gold in 2008 in Beijing in the 50m back S3, as well as a silver in the 50m freestyle S3.

Four years later, she finished fourth in both events in London.

Yet, even as their daughter grew from strength to strength in the pool, the Yips had their own Olympic-sized quest.

Margaret said their greatest challenge was the ceaseless quest to find someone who could cure her or help her live as full a life as possible.

For Pin Xiu, trips to clinics and hospitals were almost as routine as time in the pool. The Yips sought help from mainstream treatment to traditional cures and Pin Xiu obediently downed bitter concoctions and allowed herself to have almost-daily leg massages.

She took it all in her stride.

"She will just do whatever you say can help her legs," said Mum.

It was Pin Xiu's medical bills, and not her swim training and competition expenses - most of which are paid for by the Singapore Disability Sports Council - which have been the greatest burden on their finances, one they bear willingly.

Mindful of their daughter's happiness, the Yips were never stressed about how training could affect Pin Xiu's studies. Swimming took precedence over school in 2008, the year she sat her O levels.

Margaret said: "I told her if she didn't do well, she could just repeat the exam."

She did well enough to become a sports and health student at Republic Polytechnic.

This year, she deferred her final-year studies at the Singapore Management University to concentrate on preparing for the Rio Games. Mum said she would have graduated in July otherwise.

By giving their talented and single-minded child the space to think and make choices for herself, Pin Xiu's parents have encouraged her independence. In fact, the self-opportunist pair are hard-pressed to think of instances when she needs help around the house.

Margaret finally thinks of something: Sometimes Pin Xiu needs items in her wardrobe she cannot reach. "She may tell me in advance what clothes she'll like to wear the next day and where these are exactly, so I can get them for her."

She also needs help getting into her tricky competition swimsuits, which her close friend and fellow swimmer, Theresa Goh, lends a hand with. Her waist-length hair is tucked into her swim cap by coach Mick Masey, who also holds her hands before the start of a race because she cannot hold the bar on her own.

But she gets around on her own by cab, is an expert at texting with her thumb and a muckler, and opens bottle caps using her palms.

A few months ago, she cooked her own meal and proudly sent pictures to her parents and brothers.

And she has done what most people never would, in reaching the pinnacle of her chosen sport.

Her parents, who were present at the Olympic Aquatics Stadium for Pin Xiu's second final, say they could not have wished for more.

Said Mum: "Seeing my children so independent, I always tell them that I can close my eyes now and go."

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