

Para-swimmer
defers studies to
train full-time
in quest for
Paralympic glory



The 8th ASEAN Para Games will be held here from Dec 3-9, with some 1,500 athletes from 11 countries competing for honours. As Team Singapore readies for the battle on home ground, TODAY takes a closer look at each of the 15 sports that will be contested, and the inspirational stories behind the local athletes participating in them. The focus today is on swimming.

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SINGAPORE – National para-swimmer Yip Pin Xiu, Singapore's first and only Paralympics gold medallist, is feeling weaker by the year. And she knows she has no time to lose.

It is why the 23-year-old made the decision last week to defer her studies to train full-time in her quest for glory at next year's Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro, knowing that it may be her final chance to taste Paralympic glory again — just like she did in 2008 when she won the 50m backstroke (S3) event.

Yip is in a race against time as she fights muscular dystrophy, a condition marked by the progressive weakening of the muscles. She confided in TODAY that she can no longer do certain things with her hands, as compared with two to three years ago.

"I am feeling weaker than I did some years back. I can do less and less with my fingers, and my grip. My core control is also getting worse," said Yip, a final-year political science student at the Singapore Management University and Team Singapore's flag bearer at next month's ASEAN Para Games (APG) here.

"I don't want to regret not putting in enough effort (to pursue my best in swimming), so I've decided to go full-time. The Paralympics doesn't come around often, and I really want to do my very best for Rio, and I am super motivated.

"I believe that nothing ventured, nothing gained. If I don't try, I will never know whether I can reach my dream. One semester of studies can hold, but the Paralympics come just once every four years. Thankfully, my parents are very supportive."

GOLD MEDALLIST SETS SIGHTS ON RIO

YIP IN RACE AGAINST TIME



Top: Yip Pin Xiu won Paralympic gold in 2008. Above: Yip (right) and fellow para-swimmer Theresa Goh have lunch. PHOTOS: JASON GUAH

Judging by the results she has clocked of late, Yip is on a good track towards Rio. With a new coach this year in Mick Massey, the former coach of Great Britain's Paralympics swimming team, the Singaporean said she has improved in leaps and bounds, and she is nearing some of her best times in the pool.

"How much I am nearing those (best) timings, I will tell you after the APG," said Yip, who switched from the S3 to the S2 class this year — with the lower number indicating a greater degree of impairment.

"Next month's APG will be a platform for me to get in some good timings too, so that I know that I am on the right track to Rio."

While Yip is Singapore's first and only Paralympics gold medallist, she is honest enough to admit that she may not even win a medal on the regional stage next month. She won a silver in 100m backstroke (S6) in the Myanmar Games in 2014.

After all, at the APG, she may be up against a field of swimmers much stronger than she is. As there are

insufficient competitors to make up the S2 events, Yip may end up competing in higher classes, in S4 or S5, against athletes with lesser impairment.

"I am not looking to win medals at the APG, because I may be competing a few classes up at S4 or S5," she said. "I am just aiming for good timings. I don't really want to think that people will feel disappointed with me (if I don't win the medals), but let's just hope they get the message that it is like this because of the situation, and not because I am lousy. No, no, no."

One of the poster girls of Singapore para sports, Yip has featured regularly in promotional videos and marketing collateral ahead of the APG. But behind that strong facade of a champion swimmer, it might come as a surprise that Yip used to feel inferior. She was admittedly "shy and reserved" growing up, and was often bullied in school.

"I still remember some of them (the bullies), and tried looking them up on Facebook but couldn't find them," she said with a laugh. "They

ASEAN PARA GAMES SWIMMING

● In 1960, since the first Paralympic Games in Rome, where swimming was one of eight sports practised, it is now one of the most popular. The number of participating athletes and countries has been increasing over the years. Athletes are classified on their functional ability to perform each stroke, and their skills are tested in freestyle, backstroke, butterfly, breaststroke and medley events.

Classification:

● The sport class names in swimming consist of a prefix "S", "SM" or "SB" and a number. The prefixes stand for the strokes and the number indicates the sport classes. The lower number indicates a more severe activity limitation. The prefix "S" stands for swimming (freestyle, backstroke and butterfly), "SM" stands for individual medley and "SB" stands for breaststroke.

● Swimmers are divided into 10 classes based on degree of functional disability: S1 to S10. The most severely affected are in class S1 — these swimmers normally use wheelchairs outside of the pool. There are three additional classes — S11, S12 and S13 — for visually impaired swimmers. The lower number indicates a greater degree of impairment. Class S11 swimmers are blind or nearly blind, and compete in blacked-out goggles.

Team Singapore:

● Yip Pin Xiu, Theresa Goh, Toh Wei Soong, James Leo, Chew Zi Ling, Danielle Moi, Benson Tan, Lawrence Tay, Han Liang Chou, Bryan James Seow, Joshua Tang, Siao Ek Jin, Sophie Soon and Wong Meng Ee.



VIDEO YIP PIN XIU ON THE UPCOMING ASEAN PARA GAMES

Scan the QR code using the reader app on your smartphone, or you can visit bit.ly/swimmeryip for the video.

would throw stapler bullets and other things at my hair. I think some didn't like me because, maybe, they thought I am different, so they treated me differently. Even the teacher whom I reported the bullying to brushed my complaint aside. That hurt me."

But national recognition from swimming has turned Yip from bully victim to a Singapore heroine.

"My life has changed so much since I joined the national swimming team when I was 12," she said, beaming. "I hope this APG will inspire a lot more people with disabilities to come join the sporting community, and we will achieve great things together. As a more senior member of the APG contingent, I will try to lead by example to the younger ones too, especially the debutants, and lead with confidence."