

The Straits Times Athlete of the Year

SIMPLY AMAZING, SHE INSPIRES ALL

Unlike other athletes who get stronger, Yip's getting weaker but proud to be seen as equal

Jonathan Wong

Yip Pin Xiu will look back at 2015 as the year she faced her fear of heights and jumped out of a plane from 12,000 feet, battled a degenerative condition to set a world record in the pool and rediscovered within herself a hunger that had gone temporarily silent.

It will also be remembered as the year in which the para-swimmer distinguished herself from all others in Singapore sport, an achievement which saw her named The Straits Times Athlete of the Year in a gala ceremony yesterday.

Yip, 24, edged out a stellar field of nominees that included Shayna Ng, winner of the All Events title at the Women's World Bowling Championships; SEA Games 200m sprint

champion Shanti Pereira; para-footballer Khairul Anwar, the first local to score a hat-trick at the National Stadium; and 2014 Athlete of the Year winner Joseph Schooling, who captured a historic bronze medal in the 100m butterfly at the Fina World Championships.

Said Yip, who was born with muscular dystrophy which gradually causes her muscles to lose their ability to function: "All the nominees are so amazing, I'm very surprised and I'd like to thank everyone for the support."

"I'm very grateful for this and I hope that in the years to come, the support (for sport) will grow and we will do even better as One Team Singapore."

The final-year Singapore Management University social sciences undergraduate received her award

from Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu during a lunch attended by about 150 members of the local sporting fraternity, including 20 ST readers, at the Raffles City Convention Centre.

Ms Fu paid tribute to Yip's accomplishments – the S2 swimmer had raced and beaten competitors three classes more mobile than her in the S5 50m backstroke event at last December's Asean Para Games – and noted that having "two out of five finalists from the disability sport speaks volumes about how the sport has come so far".

She added: "Putting the sports achievement aside, it's really the values that we celebrate. The values of overcoming obstacles, being determined to pursue your dream and also putting in consistent hard work."

"I think Pin Xiu resembles all that... We're extremely proud of the values that she represents and we hope that more Singaporeans will be inspired."

"We are working to have a common understanding of what the Singapore spirit is about and I think Pin Xiu will give us some good ideas about it."

This is Yip's second nomination. Her first was for the inaugural 2008 award which went to swimmer Tao Li. Back then, Yip had won the 50m back S3 at the Beijing Paralympic Games to become Singapore's first – and only – Paralympic champion.

She was also one of 10 finalists for this year's inaugural ST Singaporean of the Year award.

Said ST sports editor Marc Lim, who headed the 2015 award's 13-member judging panel: "The calibre of this year's nominees made picking a winner a very tough job for the judging panel. All of them are champions and sporting heroes in their own right."

"But inspiration is one of the core principles of the ST Athlete of the Year award and in 2015, the judges felt that there was no one more inspirational than Pin Xiu."

"Unlike other athletes who are getting stronger, her body is getting weaker... Pin Xiu is the epitome of an athlete who refuses to be beaten, by an opponent or her condition."

"And that is why she is the ST Athlete of the Year 2015."

Yip won seven of the 13 votes and is the second para-athlete to win the prestigious annual award after para-equestrian rider Laurentia Tan's triumph for the 2012 edition.

For Yip, who was wearing a peach-coloured dress, the trophy she clasped in between her hands was recognition of a bigger ideal.

"Winning this award to me means that the para-athletes and able-bodied athletes in Singapore are more or less considered equal now to the general public and I'm very, very honoured to be a part of this."

"I wouldn't call myself an inspiration but I do hope that people see that in life, you get opportunities and you just have to seek them out for yourself and latch onto those opportunities and work really, really

hard to get to where you want in life."

A medal at the Rio Paralympics in September is the next task ahead for her and one that Yip is determined to succeed in.

She said: "Prior to 2015, I felt like I'd stagnated and didn't really have the motivation to train."

"But that's changed and every single session now, I try and push myself as much as I can. I'm not going to Brazil just to participate but to finish on the podium."

But thoughts of that silverware were put on hold even as her latest prize went home with her parents.

Yesterday, as the ballroom emptied, she was among the last to leave, quietly and merrily wheeling herself towards the adjoining mall.

Her friends were waiting for her. Shopping had to be done and a movie would be watched.

Just an ordinary afternoon for an extraordinary young woman.

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Yip Pin Xiu and Khairul Anwar with the mothers of fellow nominees Shanti Pereira (second from left), Shayna Ng (third from left), Joseph Schooling (second from right), Minister Grace Fu (fourth from left), flanked by ST sports editor Marc Lim and F&N CEO (non-alcoholic beverages) Lee Meng Tat. ST PHOTOS: NEO XIAOBIN

GOOD JOB

Congratulations to Pin Xiu on being awarded The Straits Times Athlete of the Year. Definitely a deserving winner after her world record performance at the Asean Para Games. Special shout out to all the other nominees as well.

JOSEPH SCHOOLING, fellow ST Athlete of the Year nominee, and the winner for 2014.

THANKLESS TASK

It was a very tough choice given the five nominees but when you consider the impact of the performance and its ability to inspire people, and the way Pin Xiu has been able to overcome all the obstacles in her life, she bears all the hallmarks of a champion.

ANNABEL PENNEFATHER, Singapore National Olympic Council vice-president and one of the judges

SERIOUS WORK

She is a very focused person which makes coaching very easy. No matter what I give her in training, she does it.

MICK MASSEY, Yip Pin Xiu's coach

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT

What Pin Xiu has achieved will hopefully continue to raise the profile of para-sports in Singapore and encourage a more inclusive society.

THERESA GOH, national para-swimmer



Yip and fellow nominee Khairul Anwar (third from right) with some of the 20 ST readers invited to the event. The ST Athlete of the Year accolade was launched in 2008 and is backed by F&N's 100Plus.



Yip with fellow Team Singapore athletes (from left) para-swimmer Theresa Goh, kayaker Sarah Chen, swimmer Amanda Lim and athlete Dipna Lim-Prasad.



Minister Grace Fu chatting with 10 Singapore Sports School students who were invited to the function.



Five of the six external judges – (from left) swimmer Tao Li; retired footballer Aleksandar Duric; Singapore National Olympic Council vice-president Annabel Pennefather; silat exponent Shakir Juanda; and former badminton player Fu Mingtian, winner of the 2011 award. The sixth external judge was netballer Premila Hirubalan. ST PHOTO: TAMARA CRAU