

# THE STRAITS TIMES ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

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Yip Pin Xiu loves pushing her limits, even though she needs a longer recovery time than before. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

Yip Pin Xiu (swimming)

## Putting tough times to bed

### After a difficult start to 2019, Yip is ready for Tokyo without retirement on her mind

Nicole Chia

Spring was preparing to arrive but sleep would not come. For several months last year, Yip Pin Xiu would get up in the middle of the night and anxiously wonder: "What if I never get better?"

Those sleepless nights haunted her following the Melbourne leg of the World Para Swimming World Series last February while she also confided her insecurities to good friend and now-retired swimmer Theresa Goh.

Yip, a three-gold Paralympic champion, said her timings and form at the start of last year were bad and her unease was growing as the World Para Swimming Championships in September loomed.

"You stick with the idea that when you keep with the process and keep doing it, things will get better. So I expected the Singapore (stop of the series in May) to be a bit better but still, my timings weren't very good," said the 28-year-old, adding she had never felt such despair in her 16 years as a competitive swimmer.

"I was very down because regardless of what I did in training... I just could not feel fast and powerful again. There was just a component that was missing."

She and Goh eventually parted ways with their coach of eight months, Han Jun, in July. Former national swimmer and two-time Olympian Mark Chay took over while Yip continued to work with her sports science team - a biomechanist, a physiologist, a strength and conditioning coach - to hone her basics and improve stroke efficiency.

Chay communicated well with

herself and Goh, said Yip. "A good coach doesn't just follow a template, a good coach looks at the athlete and sees what is necessary. He understood our needs but again, it was a very short duration so I didn't know if my times would improve."

Her fears proved unfounded at the world meet in London as she won two golds, in the 50m and 100m backstroke 'S2, ending a nine-year world title drought.

These accomplishments earned her a nomination for The Straits Times Athlete of the Year Award.

There were other positives Yip took away from a tough first half of 2019.

"It reassured me that even with a few months of training that did not agree with me, I'm still the athlete that I was, I'm still the person that I am and it's not that easy to lose that part of me," said the Nominated Member of Parliament.

No wonder with about six months to the Tokyo Paralympics, the reigning 50m and 100m backstroke champion feels only excitement towards her title defence.

She knows so much has changed in the last four years. Her body needs longer recovery time and she "cannot function" if she does not take her afternoon nap on days she has two training sessions.

"People think that (just because) I won in 2016, I can apply the same method and win again, but things change. The environment changes, the body changes," she added.

"I always set time targets. I cannot win a gold medal by saying I want a gold medal. I have to win a gold medal by setting a time and making sure that time is faster than everybody else's."

Retirement is difficult for her to imagine because swimming is her life and she knows it is not time to stop yet because "on days I get super tired I think about whether I would rather do anything else, and the answer is no. I think I want to go to Paris (Paralympics in 2024)".

She added: "I really enjoy working in a team. I enjoy having a plan, I really love pushing myself every single session feeling tired. I find joy in the exertion."

Nothing is ever guaranteed in life and in sport but, these days, Yip sleeps more soundly.

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### Comeback queen



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Yip Pin Xiu  
Swimming

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