

High-performance event pushes all sorts of human limits

Sporting Life



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Singapore swimmer Yip Pin Xiu is at her fourth Paralympics. She owns three golds and two world records, which she set at Rio 2016. Her other achievements include being a former Nominated Member of Parliament and co-authoring a book. ST FILE PHOTO

There's a carbon-fibre foot used by sprinters, with a part called the Vertical Shock Pylon, which has a seriously cool name. The Cheetah. There's a racing wheelchair which Tatyana McFadden – what, you don't know her and her 17 medals? – used at the 2016 Games which was designed by a company that knows a little about swift motoring. Like BMW.

So let's be clear, these Games that start today, with 4,400 athletes in 539 events in 22 sports, they're not some fun pastime. The Paralympics are a high-tech, high-performance congregation of the highly motivated, all of them tussling for medals which have circular indentations on them so that visually-impaired athletes can tell them apart. One indentation means gold. Two means silver.

This is a tuned tribe who have been perfectly caught in a brilliant series of advertisements by Citi which say: It's OK, You Can Stare. At the talent, they mean.

Yip Pin Xiu is in one of those ads, a Singaporean whose CV is thick with accomplishment. She's going to her fourth Paralympics, has three swimming golds, sweats to knock milliseconds off her timings, has co-authored a book, is in the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame, has modelled for cosmetics, was a Nominated Member of Parliament and owns a smile that can light up a small city.

Did I mention she's only 29?

And, in case you forgot, she has Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease, a disorder that leads to a progressive weakening of the muscles. It means she travels in a wheelchair but she's not confined to it. She slips off it, into the water, and breaks world records and rips apart stereotypes. Every time she swims fast, which is pretty much all the time, she is asking: What is it exactly you say I cannot do?

Why should people watch these Games, I asked her last week before she left for Tokyo and her answer was compelling.

"If you don't see something, you don't understand it. How competitive it is, how able people can be. When you see someone with a disability and you don't know them, you only look at their disability. But at a Games you can see them push limits. The disability is not limiting in the way people think it is."

These Games have their roots in the National Spinal Injuries Centre at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, where a neurologist named Dr Ludwig Guttmann held a small post-war competition – the Stoke Mandeville Games – among 16 disabled soldiers on the day the London Olympics opened in 1948.

In sport, Guttmann understood, lay a resource. In play eventually was found confidence, in competition was found purpose, in entertainment was found release and in this gathering was found a voice. From this group of 16 rose an idea that was so liberating and muscular that it was unstoppable.

By 1960, the first Paralympic Games were held with 23 nations

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and now there are roughly 170 countries and territories attending and Yip loves what this gathering represents. "It's about high performance, it's inclusive, it's diverse, it's what we're looking for in society. It's about excellence."

Paralympians are lean and fast, tinker with technique, raise their game and lift up the world. Nigeria's Lucy Ejike, for instance, a 43-year-old mother of two who has polio, is defending champion in the 61kg category where she powerlifted 142kg.

They train as hard, stress as much and – as Marcus Lee, head, sport science and sport medicine at the Singapore Sport Institute says – use the sharpening tool of science to tweak performance.

Biomechanists have filmed local shot putter Muhammad Diroy Noordin and examined his angle of release and initial velocity while a psychologist worked with swimmer Toh Wei Soong on strategies for relaxing in the call room. Archer Nur Syahidah Alim has built up endurance by doing exercises in the environment chamber with the temperature (34 deg C) turned up. Tokyo's heat, in every way, will be testing.

The Paralympics are a Games and a contest but also a movement and a message. At a rough estimate about a billion people, or 15 per cent of the world's population, live with some form of disability and not everyone is going to be an elite athlete. But everyone should have the permission to play.

It's this door to a more full life, a healthier one, which Paralympians shoulder open with their skill. They run over stigma in their wheelchairs and swat away ignorance with a single arm. Inclusion is their anthem and the first victories are of self-esteem.

Yip is thrilled that Mediacorp is televising the Games for there is no weapon as profound as awareness. And just by her chats during taxi rides in Singapore, she can feel the differing mindsets.

"Some taxi drivers are surprised to see me travelling alone and think a person with a disability should stay at home. But those who have watched the Games or para sport have more questions on my training rather than seeing me as someone that can't do anything."

The more Yip sweats and aches and wins, the more she gets on the front pages and reorients mindsets and shifts the conversation. The Games, she'll tell you, "help people look past the disability".

In Tokyo, amid people she admires, Yip will be at home, an elite athlete who is concerned with

only one condition: being fast. Ask her what her gold medals mean to her and she goes quiet.

"Hmmmmm," she says.

"Ahhhhh", she goes.

There's a long pause because she's choking up.

"That's a tough one. I'm quite emotional now talking about it. To me it's not just an individual effort, but entire Singapore coming together to help achieve this goal. It's not something I can do alone... it's the coaches, sports science, Sport Singapore, all the people around me, it's a massive effort of everything coming together and me swimming for my country."

But the medals are also weighty proof of the power of effort.

"When I was younger," she says, "a lot of people thought that because of my disability I wouldn't be able to achieve much. But I think these medals and where I currently stand in life have shown them that you need to try. And once you start trying you don't know where you end up."

Maybe in an amazing place. Maybe hurtling down a road in a carbon-fibre, aerodynamic wheelchair at 30kmh. Or maybe racing in a pool, with the Singapore flag on your cap, watched by the planet as you take on the world.