

Daring

Asean Para Games: Swimmer not afraid to go against tide

Sophie's motto in life is that if you want something, you need to work hard for it.

When Singapore swimmer Sophie Soon was 12, she was asked in a school oral examination what she could do if she could swim.

"Save lives," she replied at first, before wishfully adding: "Represent Singapore at the Paralympics."

Six years on, the visually impaired swimmer who will be making her Asean Para Games (APG) bow, is inching slowly but surely towards her ultimate goal.

And it was all possible because, despite her rapidly deteriorating vision, Sophie dared to dream - Big.

The Nanyang Polytechnic student was diagnosed with cone rod dystrophy at the age of five, when her parents realised she was always holding objects close to her eyes.

The condition leads to the loss of cone cells in the retina responsible for central and colour vision.

Now, when she looks straight, she sees nothing. She mainly uses her peripheral vision, although that is a challenge - to read on her iPhone, she needs to hold it 1-2cm from her eyes and use the zoom function for better readability.

But even as her surroundings darken, even as she relies increasingly on memory and imagination to colour a rapidly fading world, the bubbly teenager's optimism shines through - because in Sophie's world, there is no room for self-pity.

Said the swimmer, who wore a perpetual smile throughout the hour-long interview and photo shoot: "You can either live every day of your life feeling miserable and sorry for yourself, or you can just try and live the best that you can, live every day like it's your last.

"That's how I was brought up. My mother always said, 'If you want something, work for it. There's no point waiting for a miracle'."

On land, the Grade 7 violinist enjoys playing classical and baroque music, remembering every score by heart. But throw her in water and it is definitely the symphony of records breaking that drives her.

These days, she swims up to six days a week, chasing personal bests because it is an "achievement I can see". That said, her love for swimming was not always apparent.

"When I was younger, swimming wasn't exactly my thing. I stopped for almost a year



Sophie will be making her Asean Para Games debut in swimming this week. She aims to continue training hard to go for as many competitions as she can and, hopefully, qualify for the Paralympics.
ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

when I was nine," said Sophie, who performed alongside local band The Sam Willows at last year's President's Star Charity.

Part of it was down to a lack of personal coaching. At eight, she joined a swimming group but the coach did not understand her need for one-to-one guidance.

"We were both getting frustrated and it didn't work out, so I stopped." Sophie's mother Lay Hong, a vision teacher at iC2 PrepHouse, a training school for young people with impaired vision, persisted.

She found Sophie a dedicated coach, Danny Ong, who gave her personal lessons and patiently polished her technique.

"Coach Danny was the one who brought out the passion in me. "He introduced me to competitions, and I realised I enjoyed racing," said Sophie.

In July, after seven years under Ong, she competed in the Singapore Press Holdings Foundation National Para-Swimming Championships and made the national team.

Recalling the moment she got the good news, the teenager said: "I felt like I could jump off a building and survive. I just wanted to tell the whole world. "For someone who didn't really want to swim at first, to have made it here, it's just amazing."

Her dream of becoming a national swimmer now realised, Sophie has her sights set on emulating team-mates Theresa Goh and Yip Pin Xiu, both Paralympians.

She said: "They are my inspirations for swimming because they didn't let their condition hold them back. I will continue to

train hard and go for as many competitions as I can, and try to qualify for the Paralympics."

Because by now Sophie knows well enough there is only one way if she wants to get something. Work for it.

SWIMMING

GOLD MEDALS ON OFFER: 94

TEAM SINGAPORE

MEN: Toh Wei Soong, James Leo, Benson Tan, Lawrence Tay, Han Liang Chou, Bryan James Seow, Joshua Tang, Siau Ek Jin, Wong Meng Ee

WOMEN: Yip Pin Xiu, Theresa Goh, Chew Zi Ling, Danielle Moi, Sophie Soon

LAST APG: Swimmers contributed five of Singapore's seven gold in Naypyitaw

ABOUT THE SPORT: It was one of the eight sports contested at the first Paralympics in 1960, and has remained on the programme since. Yip Pin Xiu won the 50m backstroke S3 at Beijing 2008, Singapore's first Paralympic gold.

CLASSIFICATION: There are three classes - S (freestyle, butterfly, backstroke), SM (individual medley) and SB (backstroke). Each class is assigned numbers based on three impairment groups - physical (1-10), visual (11-13) and intellectual (14). The lower the number, the more severe the impairment.

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