



TELL ME MORE

## South West national paddler

# AGAINST THE ODDS

Through resilience and mental determination, Ms Toh Bee Tin overcame her disability and is now excelling on the international sporting stage.

**L**IFE HAS BEEN AN UPHILL BATTLE for Team Singapore's para table tennis player Ms Toh Bee Tin. Born with spina bifida, an opening in the spine that causes the spinal cord and nerves to protrude out of the body, the 23 year-old has lesser mobility from her waist down and uses a motorised wheelchair to get around. But that has not deterred her from leading a fulfilling and active life.

### LESSONS AT EVERY TURN

Until the age of 18, Ms Toh had to be accompanied by a family member wherever she went. When she attended a special education school run by the Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore (CPAS), which caters to students with multiple disabilities, she gained the self-confidence and mobility — and overrode her mother's apprehension — to become more independent. "With the help of CPAS School teachers, I learnt how to take public transport by myself so that I could go out on my own, without needing a family member to accompany me," says Ms Toh, who lives with her parents and two siblings in Hong Kah North. Besides her resilience in overcoming her disability, Ms Toh notes appreciatively that barrier-free access in Singapore, which has significantly improved over the last decade, has made it easier for her to move around in a wheelchair. These improvements include the widespread installation of ramps, lifts and designated spaces for wheelchair users, such as on public trains and buses, as well as in cinemas.

In 2012, shortly after graduating from CPAS, Ms Toh took up sports as a way of occupying her time and to also continue her physical therapy. She briefly tried wheelchair racing for a year but she decided to find a sport better suited to her abilities. Refusing to throw in the towel, she was determined to find a sport that she was good at and soon became interested in table tennis. After reaching out to Mr Jason Chee — one of Singapore's top para table tennis players — on Facebook, he invited her to a training session

## + SPORTS FOR ALL

- Singapore Disability Sports Council offers a wide range of para-sports for people across all disability groups. To find out more, visit [sdsc.org.sg](http://sdsc.org.sg).
- Run by Sport Singapore, ActiveSG is the national movement for sports and includes programmes for people with disabilities. Check these out at [myactivesg.com](http://myactivesg.com).
- Enabling Village, an inclusive community space set up by SG Enable, has a gym that is suitable for people with disabilities, seniors and the able-bodied. Visit [enablingvillage.sg](http://enablingvillage.sg) for more details.



at Yishun Sports Hall. Watching the national team in action fuelled Ms Toh's desire to learn the sport — despite it being a high-speed game that involves rapid ball exchanges with an opponent.

"Table tennis is challenging but fun. I enjoyed learning the different serving and returning techniques, and the variety of strategies used to beat opponents," she explains. Being a singles as well as doubles player has also honed Ms Toh's communication skills. "In doubles, you have to know your partner well enough, and vice versa, to anticipate each other's moves. If you can't get along with each other, then you are likely to lose."

### A NEVER-SAY-DIE ATTITUDE

Ms Toh's first major tournament was the 2015 ASEAN Para Games in Singapore. Two years later, at the 2017 ASEAN Para Games in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, she achieved her big breakthrough: earning a bronze medal in the Women's Singles Class 4 category. "The first time around, I was so nervous and daunted by the big-match atmosphere," she recalls. "In Kuala Lumpur, I was more experienced, so I could control my emotions better and stay calm while playing."

Winning a medal was, for Ms Toh, proof that her dedication, hard work and resilience had paid off. Besides training three times a week, she analyses match video replays of herself together with her coach to identify which areas need more practice. She also frequently watches YouTube clips of other players from around the world to pick up useful tips.

It is not just from the para table tennis community that she draws support and inspiration. Ms Toh often meets other Team Singapore athletes and para-athletes at the Singapore Sports Institute, where she trains. "We always say 'hi' to one another and, if there is time, have a quick chat. The sporting community is very friendly and inclusive, and they always encourage me to try my best," says Ms Toh.

At 23, Ms Toh is one of the youngest members on the 30-plus national para table tennis squad. She would love to remain with Team Singapore even into her 60s, the same age as the current squad's most senior player. "I have a long way to go and much more to learn, but I plan on sticking around and hopefully one day qualifying for the Paralympics," she says. *B*

**"YOU ONLY GET ONE LIFE. Live it as fully as possible and learn as many new things as you can. If you lose or fail, don't give up. Just move on, focus on the next game and keep trying — you will eventually succeed."**

Ms Toh Bee Tin



### ➤ DID YOU KNOW?

Athletes from all impairment groups, except for the visually-impaired, can compete in para table tennis.

**Classifications:** Classes 1 to 5 are for wheelchair players; and Classes 6 to 10 are for those in a standing position (a lower number indicates a higher level of disability). Class 11 comprises athletes with intellectual impairment.

**Rules:** Same as regular table tennis. The first player to win three out of five sets — each set consisting of a minimum of 11 points, with at least a two-point margin — wins the match.

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# BRIDGE

SOUTH WEST  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

“Do not be despondent about change, treat it as an opportunity to grow.”



Mr S Iswaran,  
Adviser to West Coast  
Grassroots Organisations

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