

A full-page background image of a swimmer, Theresa, in a blue pool. She is wearing a black Speedo swim cap and blue-tinted goggles. She is in a butterfly stroke, with her arms extended forward and her head above water. The water is bright blue with white foam from her stroke.

Theresa

and the four trials

by Claire Delahunty

Athens, Greece. 2004

Theresa had never flown on an airplane for so long in her life! She was nervous to travel so far from Singapore, her little home country. Athens was a long way from her mum and dad and her little brother and sister, too. She was seventeen years old. At school, she was one of the big kids. She felt confident with her friends around her, and she knew the swimming pool she trained in like the back of her hand.

This was different. She was relieved to be with her team-mates—other athletes going to compete, like her, at the Paralympic Games in Greece! Theresa's wheelchair was stowed away, and by the time she wheeled off the plane, she would be in another country! She shifted around in her seat to get comfortable, rolling the powerful swimming muscles of her shoulders.

Theresa was born with damage to her spine, and her legs had never worked like other kids' legs. But that had never slowed her down. She had tried all sorts of sports, and discovered swimming was the best one of all. She was weightless and speedy in the water. And now she was going to test that strength and speed at a big competition.

The Paralympic Village, where all the athletes stayed, was bustling. She couldn't believe she was under the same roof as so many talented people. Some of them held world records!

All of them had some sort of disability, but they achieved amazing things with their bodies.

Theresa's favourite race was the breaststroke. Fifty metres or two hundred metres, it didn't matter. She was like an unstoppable fish! Each morning she would get on the telephone to tell her parents how her races had gone.

"I'm in the finals again!" she told her mum, Rose. The tremor in her mother's voice gave away how proud she was. Seven races, seven finals—Theresa could hear her dad rustling the newspaper down the phone line.

"You're in the news!" he told her excitedly. "So close to getting a medal!"

When Theresa at last finished all her races, she did not have a medal around her neck, but she was grinning from ear to ear anyway. She was a Paralympian now. She had a feeling that a medal wouldn't be far away.

Beijing, China. 2008

Theresa stared at the lines on the swimming pool floor, looking glumly into the blue water. She had trained twice a day, six days a week for the last four years, and she had never felt so tired in her life.

The swimming pool used to seem like an old friend. Now it felt like a watery punishment. Sometimes she just wanted to stop swimming. Climb out of the pool and never climb back in. Four years was a long time to work so hard. One night as she got ready to sleep, Theresa's mother sat down gently on the edge of her bed.

"You have been working so hard, my love, you are nearly there." Theresa nodded, swiping at her face as a little tear escaped from one eye. Her mother frowned. "My girl, you can stop whenever you want. No one will force you to do this, we hate to see you so tired."

Theresa looked at her mother, her mouth a straight line.

"I can't stop mum. If I stop training now, I'll be left behind. My competitors won't slow down to wait for me. This is my chance to get a medal. Everyone expects it ... I expect it!"

Theresa's mum nodded, and planted a kiss on her forehead as she closed the door, worry in her eyes.

It felt different as Theresa boarded another plane to the Paralympic Games, this time in Beijing. China was much closer to home than Greece, and her parents were coming with her. It was comforting, knowing how much they loved her, but it didn't stop her stomach from tying itself in knots.

When Theresa lined up for the breaststroke—her best and favourite swimming race, everyone in the crowd knew she was one to watch. Many Singaporeans were in the crowd to cheer her on, but as she plopped into the water, Theresa couldn't hear anything above the thud of her heartbeat. Her mouth was dry. She was so nervous! With a jolt of panic, she realised the race was about to start. As the other swimmers took off, Theresa drove herself hard into the water. This was it!

When she touched the wall and looked up at the place board, Theresa's heart sank. She rubbed her eyes, but the numbers didn't change. Fourth place. She was 0.07 of a second behind third. Just a teensy, tiny bit of time! The bronze medal could have been hers, but it had slipped right through her fingers. On the flight home from Beijing, Theresa could barely look her parents in the eye. She was so disappointed.

London, England. 2012

When Theresa said she needed a break from swimming, nobody talked her out of it. She decided to start power-lifting, where she could use her strong arms in a different sport. She was good at it too, and as the weeks passed, she tried not to think about the water.

But one night at home, the telephone rang. It was her good friend and fellow Paralympic swimmer, Yip Pin Xiu. Theresa's heart lifted to talk to her friend, and she was eager to know how her swimming was going.

"Training is hard, and I miss you, Theresa!" Theresa's smile slipped a little bit as she nodded her head. "I miss you too, but you know, I'm still working out what I want to do next." She could hear Pin Xiu sigh down the phone. "Theresa, if I didn't know better, I would say you were hiding from the swimming pool." Theresa laughed. "But how? Swimming pools don't have eyes!" The two girls giggled at the ridiculous idea.

But that night, Theresa dreamed of a swimming pool with big eyes, calling her name. The next week, she decided to bite the bullet and stop by the swimming pool. As she rolled in, she put on her best brave face. "I'm ready to train again," Theresa told her coach. "If you're sure." Was all he said.

Pin Xiu came up and gave Theresa a huge hug. "Welcome back." Theresa trained every day and worked hard. She wasn't surprised when once again she was selected to go to the Paralympic Games—this time in London.

Each adventure was a chance to learn something, so Theresa pushed her nerves into the background and focused on trying her hardest. And she swam fast, but again, she did not go home with a medal.

“Never mind Theresa,” her coach said. “You are bouncing back from disappointment, and that always takes time.” Theresa nodded, but somewhere she wondered whether a small part of her was still hiding from the swimming pool.

Rio, Brazil. 2016

The colour and chaos of Brazil hit all of Theresa’s senses as she wheeled her way proudly around at the Paralympic Games opening ceremony. Her fourth! She couldn’t believe it.

Theresa had found a new coach, called Mick, and his blue eyes twinkled as he walked with her, and gave her a wink.

“This is it, kiddo. You know what to do,” he yelled over the hubbub.

Theresa knew. She had worked hard for this. She was here with another chance, and she was fit and ready. She had trained hard, and she was chasing that bronze medal. But at the same time, she had learned that winning a medal wasn’t everything. That was only half the battle. The first part was finding the courage to try, no matter what.

Theresa made the breaststroke finals easily, and when race day arrived, she felt calm and joyful. Little butterflies skittered around her tummy, but she brushed them aside. They were nothing like the big, tangled knots she had felt in Beijing. Theresa’s mum and dad had come with her once again. She could see their smiling faces in the crowd. They had watched her swim for many years, and she had to admit she was a little frightened she might let them down again.

As the race began and Theresa pushed her body through the water, her mind was clear and her heart was strong. It was all over in a flash, and as she took off her goggles, she counted just two names above her own.

She had done it! A bronze medal, at last! Silver tears shone in her eyes, but she couldn’t think of a nicer colour in the whole world than bronze.

As her coach helped her out of the pool, drips of water mingled with her happy tears, which she smudged on Pin Xiu, who came up to hug her. She cried on her mum and dad too, as she reached up to kiss them.

“I am so proud of you,” her father whispered in her ear.

“Four times you have tried, and every time you have grown stronger. To us, you have won every time.”

Theresa smiled, and kissed his cheek. Her dad smiled back, and chuckled. “But the fourth time is best of all.”

As Theresa lined up to receive her bronze medal at the Paralympic games, she couldn't have agreed more. She had kept working, and kept trying, no matter what came her way. There had been trials and tests and dark days, but she had passed them all. **If she had to do it all over again, she would.**

Theresa Goh

Theresa Goh Rui Si is a Singaporean swimmer and Paralympic medalist. She has competed in four consecutive summer Paralympic games—Athens, Beijing, London and Rio. Theresa was born with spina bifida, or damage to her lower spine, and she is deaf in one ear. She started swimming at the age of five, and taking part in competitions by age 12. She has won many medals and holds world records for swimming breaststroke. Theresa is an ambassador for the lesbian gay bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, and is passionate about helping young people, especially in Asia, to be comfortable with their identity. Theresa is currently deciding whether to train for one more Paralympic Games, in Tokyo in 2020. One day, she would like to coach swimming.



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What sport do you keep trying at?

When did you last feel like you succeeded?

What would you cheer if you watched Theresa swim?
