

RIDING TO VICTORY

A ROTARIAN EQUESTRIAN
TRAINS FOR THE PARALYMPICS
BY ABE PECK

Nelson Yip arrives for breakfast at the Cosmopolitan Hotel, across the street from the Hong Kong Jockey Club, a major racing venue. Although Yip has cerebral palsy, he moves briskly off the elevator. He will be the only qualified equestrian representative from the Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China in the 2008 Paralympics. It's a pretty big deal here: A multistory blue banner hangs from the club's facade, proclaiming "Hong Kong The Equine Capital," with the red 2008 Olympic logo imprinted below. Slender and handsome, 39-year-old Yip negotiates his way to our table, his legs trailing behind him; he puts aside thin walking sticks as he sits. Yip will go for the gold in the Paralympics dressage competition here in Hong Kong. And he only started training seven years ago. The 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games will be held 6-17 September in venues in Beijing and Hong Kong.

Yip focuses on his equine quest, even as he heads up businesses and travels the world. Confidence and self-esteem are his bywords; he wants to win, but prizes the ride.

"When I was an infant, I got a fever that further affected my lower limbs," he recalls matter-of-factly. "After a major operation at seven, I needed walking sticks."

Yip was briefly introduced to horseback riding as therapy, but his parents couldn't afford for him to continue. The impression remains almost centaur-like in his mind: "Blue sky and clouds. The image of freedom. Being part of the horse."

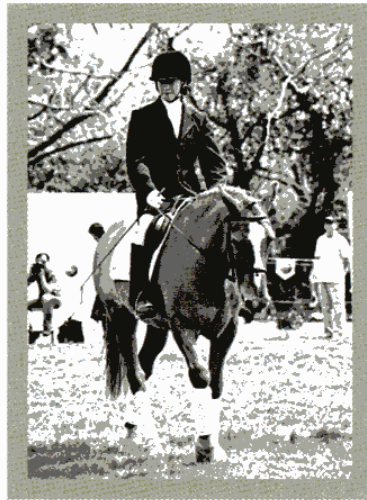
He also noticed that even the same horse can ride differently from week to week. "I was interested in why."

Yip's education reinforced that analytic bent: He received a bachelor's degree in statistics and computer science from Chinese University, a master's degree in quantitative analysis in business from City University, and an MBA from Chinese U. Now, Yip is CEO of three companies: EP Power Company Ltd., which provides energy sources to toy and appliance manufacturers; Appetizup, an electronic components vendor; and the EP Venture consultancy.

The potential of power excites Yip. "My dream is to combine lighting and humanity," he says. "There are so many poor countries that don't have lighting."

It was Yip's interest in others that led him back to horsemanship. While executive director of Hong Kong Rehabilitation Power, he significantly expanded the organization's programs for the disabled. In 2001, he began supporting team activities with the Riding for the Disabled Association, through which he'd ridden as a child. "Horse riding is not that easy. It was about having the heart and passion to try a new challenge. If they do it, they can take the second step in the journey of their lives."

One day, someone asked him, "Why aren't you riding?" That was all it took to get him back on a horse.



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While Yip needs a helper to hold the horse still, he mounts like any able-bodied person. In 2002, he rode in Wales, where the lifestyle of those on the circuit impressed him. "It wasn't about the competition. It was, 'How can I have that kind of riding – fabulous riders, well-trained horses?'"

Coaches and riding consultants, swimming, and tai chi have enhanced his form and strength. In 2003 in Kyoto, Japan, Yip scored the highest of any disabled rider in the Japan Asia Pacific Dressage competition. Wins in Australia followed in 2005. Then Yip earned a 61 percent atop a horse named Blue in the Pacific Rim International Para-dressage Event, in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. He'd qualified for the Paralympics.

He'd also impressed his colleagues. "Nelson is not only an accomplished horse-

man but also a very kind-hearted person who is always prepared to help others," says John C.C. Chan, chair of the Hong Kong Jockey Club and president of the Riding for the Disabled Association. "His achievements should be an inspiration to all of us."

Yip also has drawn strength from his involvement with the Rotary Club of Mid Level. He has been a member since 2004 and has served as secretary and vice president. "I value Rotary a lot. Members are from different industries, and we can learn a lot from each other. There are so many club functions, services, community projects – a lot of fellowship. I like the spirit."

Rotary compatriots like Yip's spirit. "Because of his background and achievements, he is a speaker at many Rotary club meetings and events," says Past District Governor Peter Wan, current chair of District 3450's Adopt-A-School project. "He was invited on a number of occasions to share his experience with young people in Hong Kong, including student participants [in this] signature district project."

But Yip has yet to cross the finish line: He'll need to achieve at least 76 percent to finish first among 78 Paralympic riders, he believes. Moreover, he may well switch from his usual mount, Icy Bet, who, at 20, sweats a lot and sags a bit in the heat, he says. "Rider and horse have to be in the same places," Yip says, "to demonstrate the accuracy, the energy, the suppleness, the harmony. There's no fighting, no argument."

A few days after our breakfast, Yip was off to England to practice an activity he sees as "quite philosophical. I like to regard it as my own competition. The result is something like a bonus." ■

ABE PECK is professor emeritus and director of business communication at the Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University.