

GetPhysical

Water polo combines the best of both worlds

National player Lim Wen Xin likes the game's swimming and teamwork aspects

Ng Wan Ching

National water polo player Lim Wen Xin has been in the water since her younger days.

She was a competitive swimmer in primary and secondary school and liked competing in relays.

Water polo first came into the picture when she was at Singapore Polytechnic, where she joined the school's water polo team.

"It combined the best of both worlds for me – swimming and being part of a team," said Ms Lim, 23, now a student at the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT).

The game has kept her on her toes. Each training session lasts about three hours.

"Having to train six times a week during the off-season means that we are always kept fit," she said.

As competition dates draw closer, Ms Lim and her teammates dou-

ble their training sessions to ensure that they are at their peak.

The national women's team finished second at the SEA Games held here in June.

BETTER HEART HEALTH

Playing water polo can improve one's cardiovascular health, as well as one's muscle strength and endurance, said Assistant Professor Benjamin Soon, who is in charge of the new physiotherapy programme at SIT. The sport also helps to give the body a good workout while putting minimal stress on the ankles, knees, hip and spine, he said.

Although swimming and water polo are done in the pool, the physical requirements are different.

Swimmers have to aim for maximum speed during a race by executing powerful strokes and kicks in the water.

Water polo players, on the other hand, need to stay afloat during the



Having to train six times a week even during the off-season means that Ms Lim Wen Xin (above) and her teammates are always kept fit. According to SIT professor Benjamin Soon, playing water polo can improve one's cardiovascular health, as well as one's muscle strength and endurance. ST PHOTO: YEO KAI WEN

game by treading water.

They swim in frequent short bursts when going after the ball, so water polo players need to build up more muscle endurance and stamina rather than power, said Prof Soon. Ball drills are also required to sharpen their shooting accuracy.

Gym sessions can be added to a training programme to boost body strength, which is what the national team does.

However, like in most sports, players have to guard against injuries.

Ms Lim, for instance, has been injured a few times.

Once, she hurt her finger and shoulder while blocking shots from

her teammates. She has also strained her right knee ligament and right wrist.

Water polo players also risk suffering damage to the soft tissue surrounding the shoulder joint.

This can be sustained from rotating the arm to throw the ball.

The action may also strain the rotator cuff muscles, said Prof Soon.

The rotator cuff is a group of muscles that controls the internal and external rotation of the arm.

To minimise shoulder injuries, the player should strengthen the rotator cuff muscles and the muscles controlling the shoulder blades, said Prof Soon.

It is important to maintain good body posture – standing upright with shoulders pulled back slightly – rather than slouching, so that the shoulders and shoulder blades are working optimally, he added.

Prolonged treading of water can cause injury too, as the "egg-beater" kicks can strain the knee's ligaments and meniscus. A player should work on strengthening the hamstring and quadriceps and maintaining flexibility in the hips.

Treading water may also give rise to muscle cramps. This usually happens when the muscles are worked beyond what they are accustomed to, said Prof Soon.

The best way to avoid cramps is to build one's endurance in the muscles that are needed, he said.

Ms Lim does arm, shoulder and groin stretches before water polo practice. "These exercises help us by warming up the muscles we use the most," she said.

If you are interested in water polo but have not played it before, you can start with flippa ball.

This simplified version of water polo is usually played in a wading pool about 1m deep. Anyone who can swim can pick up the game easily, said Ms Lim.

wanching@sph.com.sg

Try these moves

Assistant Professor Benjamin Soon, who is in charge of a new physiotherapy programme at the Singapore Institute of Technology, gives some tips on stretching and strengthening exercises. National water polo player Lim Wen Xin demonstrates.

1 SITTING GROIN STRETCH

- Sit on the ground with the soles of the feet touching.
- Clasp the feet together with your hands and draw in the heels close to your body. Drop your knees towards the ground as much as you comfortably can.
- Finally, lean your body forward and hold the position for 15 seconds. Do the stretch twice.

This stretches the hip adductors (which pull the hip towards the body's mid-line) and hip internal rotators, which help to rotate the thighs inwards.

2 SITTING HAMSTRING STRETCH

- Start in a sitting position with one leg bent and the other fully straightened at the knee. Tuck the bent leg as close to your body as possible.
- Lean your body towards the straightened leg and use both hands to hold the ankle while keeping the head down.
- Stay in this position for 15 seconds. Switch legs and repeat. Do each stretch twice.

This stretches the back muscles and hamstring on the straightened leg.

3 STANDING CHEST STRETCH

- Stand straight and place your right forearm against a wall with your elbow bent at a 90-degree angle.
- Gently turn your body away from the wall until you feel a stretch at the front of your chest and shoulder.
- Hold the position for 15 seconds and repeat twice. Do the same for the other side.

This stretches the chest muscles and shoulder internal rotators.

4 STRENGTHENING WITH RESISTANCE BAND

- Secure a resistance band on a stationary object, making sure that both ends are free and are of equal length.
- Hold one end of the resistance band in each hand.
- Stand straight and pull the resistance band by raising your arms upwards.
- Keep the elbow straight at all times.
- Hold the position for 10 seconds. Repeat 10 times.

This exercise strengthens the deltoids in the shoulders, biceps, and the back and core muscles around the torso.

5 GOING FOR THE SHOT

- Set your body into a slight rotation, with the shoulder in full external rotation, ready to release the ball for the powerful shot.

