Water polo combines the best of both worlds

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

Having to train six times a week means that Ms Lin Wen Xin (above) and her teammates are always kept fit. According to ST professor Benjamin Soon, playing water polo can improve one's cardiovascular health, as well as one's muscle strength and endurance.

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 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 double up 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 2014.

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

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

Water polo players, on the other hand, need to stay afloat during the game by treading water.

"They swim in shorter bursts when going after the ball, so water polo players have to develop 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 the training programme to build body strength, which is what the national team does.

However, like in soccer, players have to be able to move around on land too. Ms Lim, for instance, has been in triathlon teams.

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 suffer 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 control 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 "nag-bear" 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 up 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 lap swimming.

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

"It is quite accessible as you only need to tread water for the strokes in the game. You don't have to concern yourself with the rules. You can play it on your own or with your friends."