

TRY, TRY AGAIN

Yiu Kam-shing, popularly known as Salom, has attracted Hong Kong's attention with his speed and talent. Among only a handful of well-known Chinese rugby players, his story of outrunning adversity is an inspiration to many.

STORY APPLE MANDY

Arriving early one evening at the Happy Valley Sports Ground, Yiu Kam-shing is upbeat and energetic. In the Hong Kong rugby team's blue-and-white uniform, he's certainly dressed the part for *The Peak's* photo shoot. But after 15 minutes, he needs to dash off to yet another training session in preparation for the Asia men's Olympic qualifying tournament, which is going to be held in Hong Kong this November.

Yiu, popularly known as Salom, is among a handful of Chinese rugby players who have been successfully playing rugby sevens – or seven-a-side – and 15s for more than five years. Playing both versions has been a huge accomplishment for him because they are played very differently. The six-foot 27-year-old has established himself as one of the fastest sprinters in the field, which gives him the edge as a winger, a position that demands speed.

Not many Chinese players representing Hong Kong have enjoyed as much success as Yiu. Local rugby is still dominated by non-Chinese faces and only a few has made it to the top. One of them is Chan

Fuk-ping, who, in 1997, was the first local Chinese player to represent Hong Kong at the Rugby World Cup Sevens. Ricky Cheuk is another, known as the first local Chinese player to score a try in the Rugby World Cup Sevens, in 2001.

"Playing rugby gives me a feeling of responsibility," says Yiu. "That's what the older generation of athletes passed on to us – and I want to be an ambassador to the Chinese community."

Yiu's first encounter with rugby was as a spectator at the Hong Kong Sevens in 2000, when he was in Form 2. There he saw how the crowd cheered on the players, who beat the opposition with good tactics and solid strategy. Yiu came home and looked more into the sport, with dreams to play professionally.

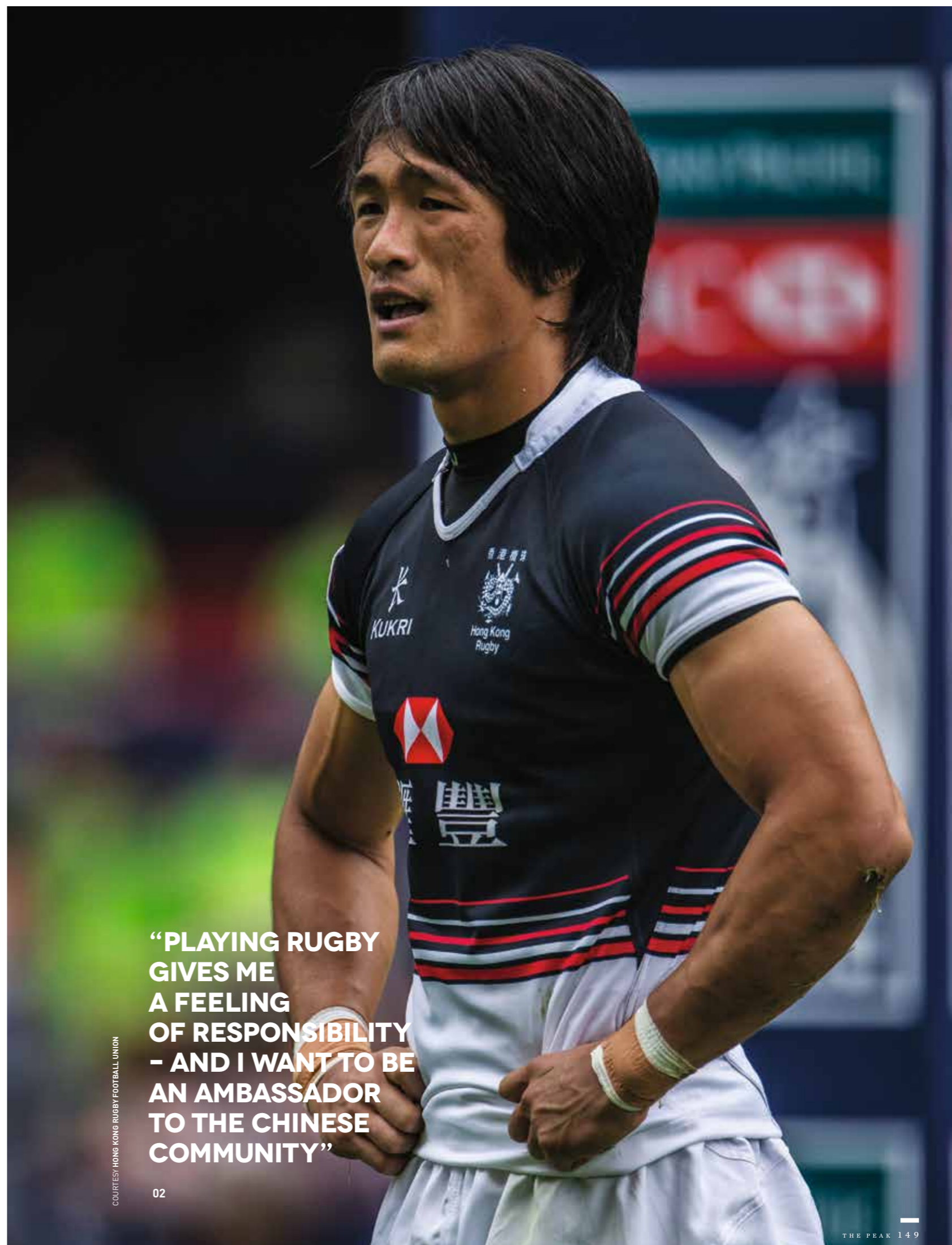
HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Born in Guangdong province, Yiu left his two brothers and younger sister and moved to Hong Kong with his parents when he was nine years old. Growing up, his parents were against the idea of him playing sports



01 Yiu Kam-shing (right of centre) and the Hong Kong team played at the Cathay Pacific/HSBC Hong Kong Sevens 2015.

02 Yiu Kam-shing, also known as 'Salom'



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COURTESY: HONG KONG RUGBY FOOTBALL UNION

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– Pieter Schats, Hong Kong Rugby Football Union

professionally. “When I was in secondary school, my parents didn’t agree with the idea of me being a professional athlete,” says Yiu. “But I showed progress as I trained and my personality changed.”

And since that change was for the better, his father, who works in construction, and his mother, who is now retired, became “supportive and happy”. “I was able to convince my parents that I could have a career in rugby,” says Yiu. “They saw the change in my attitude – I was happier, more confident, disciplined, motivated and mature. I also became more organised, responsible and positive. I supported myself and made contributions to my family.”

Yiu stop schooling at Form 5, when he was 18, and started playing rugby. He went to a summer course run by the Hong Kong Rugby Football Union (HKRFU) in Tai Po, and carried on playing for the Valley Fort Rugby Football Club in 2008, where he met Andy Yuen and Lee Cheuk-yin, who spotted his talent and encouraged him to reach for his dreams. At 19, he was invited to be part of the Hong Kong Youth Team and then the Hong Kong team after a year of rigorous training.

Playing for the Hong Kong team was a step up for Yiu, but challenges arose during training sessions. “Language was a problem,” he says. “Everybody [on the team] was speaking in English and it was very difficult for me to communicate. I felt scared because my English wasn’t that fluent.”

Yiu also had to modify his fitness exercises, as well as deal with stress. “I was a sprinter so my speed and fitness level was completely different from the other players. I worked very hard on bringing up my fitness level so I could cope and adapt to this physically



demanding sport,” adds Yiu. “Dealing with stress is another big challenge. Often, stress comes from the pressure to reach a goal – it could be winning first place or a specific cup.”

Obviously, Yiu has more than learned to cope. His first Hong Kong Sevens was in 2010, and he has played in every Sevens since then. His career soared when the men’s sevens squad won silver medals at the 2009 East Asian Games and the 2010 and 2014 Asian Games. He also participated in mainland China’s National Games in Liaoning in 2013, in which the team came in second, as well as in the recent Asian Rugby Championship, playing 15-a-side.

Overall, Hong Kong rugby’s star continues to rise and that has helped both Yiu and his sport. In 2013, rugby became the first team sport to be granted an “Elite Sports” status by the Hong Kong Sports Institute, a government-funded organisation in Sha Tin that supports sports development and athlete training. The granting of the status provided the HKRFU national sevens team with an annual stipend to be shared among qualified players, as well as special training to enhance their competitiveness on the Asian and international stage. Yiu was among the union’s 40 players to qualify for the four-year programme.

“The vast majority of the youth players are predominantly Chinese. But as they get older, a lot of them don’t continue with playing rugby,” says Pieter Schats, chairman of the HKRFU and executive director at Fung Retailing. “Salom is a very good athlete. He came to rugby a little later in life but he has become extremely successful. He’s one of the pin-up boys for the local community.”

Clearly, being involved in this elite programme has given Yiu and his team some benefits. He says that now, without the pressure to find other work, they are able to get more rest between training sessions which means they can recover faster and perform better.

03 Yiu Kam-shing has established himself as one of the fastest sprinters in the field.



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opportunity to play at the forthcoming Asian Sevens Olympic Qualifier, organised by the Asian Rugby Football Union, which will take place in November 7 and 8 at the Hong Kong Stadium.

"It's a very, very big deal because Hong Kong has never hosted a qualifying event like this," says Schats, who is confident that both the men's and women's teams will represent Hong Kong at the Olympics. The teams are strong contenders, with the men ranking first and the women ranking third at the 2014 Asian Sevens Series tournament.

At the moment, there are 16 to 18 athletes in Hong Kong training and competing for the final 12 spots – seven in the field and five substitutes changing on a regular basis during the course of a 14-minute match.

But there's more to rugby than just training and competing on the pitch. "It's a fifth element, that of 'lifestyle' – where individuals have to look closely at what they do outside the immediate training environment – which is where a player can make the biggest gains," Schats says.

Yiu, who's now engaged and lives with his fiancée, also shares his experiences during visits at local schools. Together with some of his teammates, they hold public activities such as mini-rugby festivals and outreach programmes. They also coach junior teams and educate students from various schools about the Hong Kong team and men's rugby sevens through competitions.

"Being an ambassador gives me the opportunity to educate the Chinese community and let them know that rugby is an enjoyable sport," says Yiu. "The misconception about rugby is that you need to look buff in order to play, but you don't have to be. Each position has a different physique." 🙏



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NO PAIN, NO GAIN

Yiu Kam-shing's stellar performances are a result of his fitness routine and a regimented diet. With a body mass index of 8.8 per cent, he's one of the leanest players on the team – and maintaining his shape is vital for performing well. Yiu shares his typical daily strength-training regimen:

UPPER BODY

- 125kg bench push-ups for three sets of five repetitions
- Chin-ups for six sets, with 55kg added weight

LOWER BODY

- Power clean, an Olympic-style lift, for three sets of five
- 170kg squats for three sets of five
- 100kg Romanian deadlifts for six sets of eight

RUNNING SESSIONS

- 50-metre zigzag runs
- Straw man sessions, which involve flipping a heavy rope in three sets of 15 seconds each
- Farmer's walk – with both hands carrying 60kg on each side while walking 20 metres for two sets of three

DIET PLAN

Mornings Two eggs, two hunks of meat, a glass of milk and a vitamin C supplement drink

Lunch and Dinner Two bowls of rice with red or white meat, and vegetables



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With the institute's advanced training facilities, there is also more room for improving skills.

"Salom is a very easy athlete to train because he is so dedicated to being the best that he can," says Gareth Baber, a former scrum-half and Cardiff Blues coach who is now the head coach of the Hong Kong national sevens team. "He is eager to learn, driven to improve himself physically while also being humble enough to know that he has a lot of work to do to accomplish what he and the team want."

OLYMPIC ASPIRATIONS

Rugby will be returning to the Olympics as a sport for the 2016 Summer Games in Rio de Janeiro, and Yiu is working hard to earn his spot on the sevens team. At least 20 representative teams across Asia, including Japan, South Korea and Singapore, will have the

04-05 Yiu Kam-shing and a teammate reach out to potential rugby recruits.

