

The tough, long road to the Games

After two years, paddlers Isabelle and Clarence are geared up for Youth Olympics

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SINGAPORE — To the uninitiated, Singapore's junior table tennis players Isabelle Li and Clarence Chew appear to be living the jet-setter's dream.

They've been home for less than six months since August 2008, criss-crossing continents for camps and tournaments in preparation for the inaugural Youth Olympic Games here from Aug 14 to 26.

The Singapore Sports School students just returned from a 35-day training camp in Hebei, China, and will depart for the Asian Junior Championships in Thailand this morning. More trips will follow, with meets in Korea (July 28-Aug 1) and Hong Kong (Aug 4-8).

But it hasn't been a cake walk for the two teenagers. It's been tough spending time away from family, friends and school, but the pair are persevering in an effort to put up a good performance at the Games.

"It's definitely tough being away and I was getting quite homesick ... it has been the most intensive two years of my life," 15-year-old Isabelle, who will be sitting for her GCE 'O' Level examinations this year, told reporters yesterday.

"This is one of the most comprehensive preparations I've ever had for any competition. I think I've improved in all areas and it's been a very good morale booster. I can't wait for the Games to start — there's nervousness and excitement, but mostly it's excitement and I can't wait for the day to come."

The two paddlers, who won the mixed team bronze medal at the Asian Youth Games last year, have spent several

months in centralised training camps in China and competed in over 40 overseas tournaments.

Isabelle, the 2010 ITTF Junior Circuit leader, won a clutch of titles at junior and cadet open events along the way, and is currently the world No 24 for girls' under-18.

In September last year, Clarence, 14, took home gold medals from junior meets in Chile, Argentina and Ecuador and his ranking leapt from 165 to 36 within a year.

A total of 32 boys and 32 girls will compete in two singles and one mixed team event at the Youth Olympics.

Powerhouses China will be represented by world No 1 under-15 players — Yin Hang, who clinched three medals in the boys's singles at last year's Asian Youth Games, and 2009 girls' World Junior Championships runner-up Gu Yuting.

Some familiar faces who competed in the Games for the

continents' young athletes last July will be back, including South Korea's Yang Ha Eun (under-18, world No 10), Ayuka Tanioka of Japan and North Korean chopper Kim Song I, who denied Isabelle a singles bronze.

Although it will be tough for the two Singaporeans to find a place on the podium next month, they are drawing inspiration from the national women's team's historic gold medal World Team Table Tennis Championships at Moscow in May.

"China are strong, but not invincible, and the seniors showed that if you play with confidence, you stand a chance," said Clarence.

While national youth coach Zu Haining recognises the gap between the top-ranked players and the Singapore pair, he told MediaCorp they are now "calmer and mentally stronger".

"Based on their recent results and performances, they have improved a lot," he said. "I think we have the best chances in the girls' singles and mixed team event."



Clarence and Isabelle hope their hard work will pay off at the Youth Olympics. KOH MUI FONG