

ISABELLE'S NO ORDINARY TEENAGER

Singapore table tennis player, 14, loves going against the norm



By LIN XINYI

IF THERE is one thing that sets Isabelle Li apart, it is the 14-year-old's inclination to go against the norm.

When she was a pupil at Chongfu Primary School, she took up Chinese dance despite not enjoying it much.

Why? Because that was the only way she could have kept her hair long as school rules forbade pupils' hair from touching their uniform's collar.

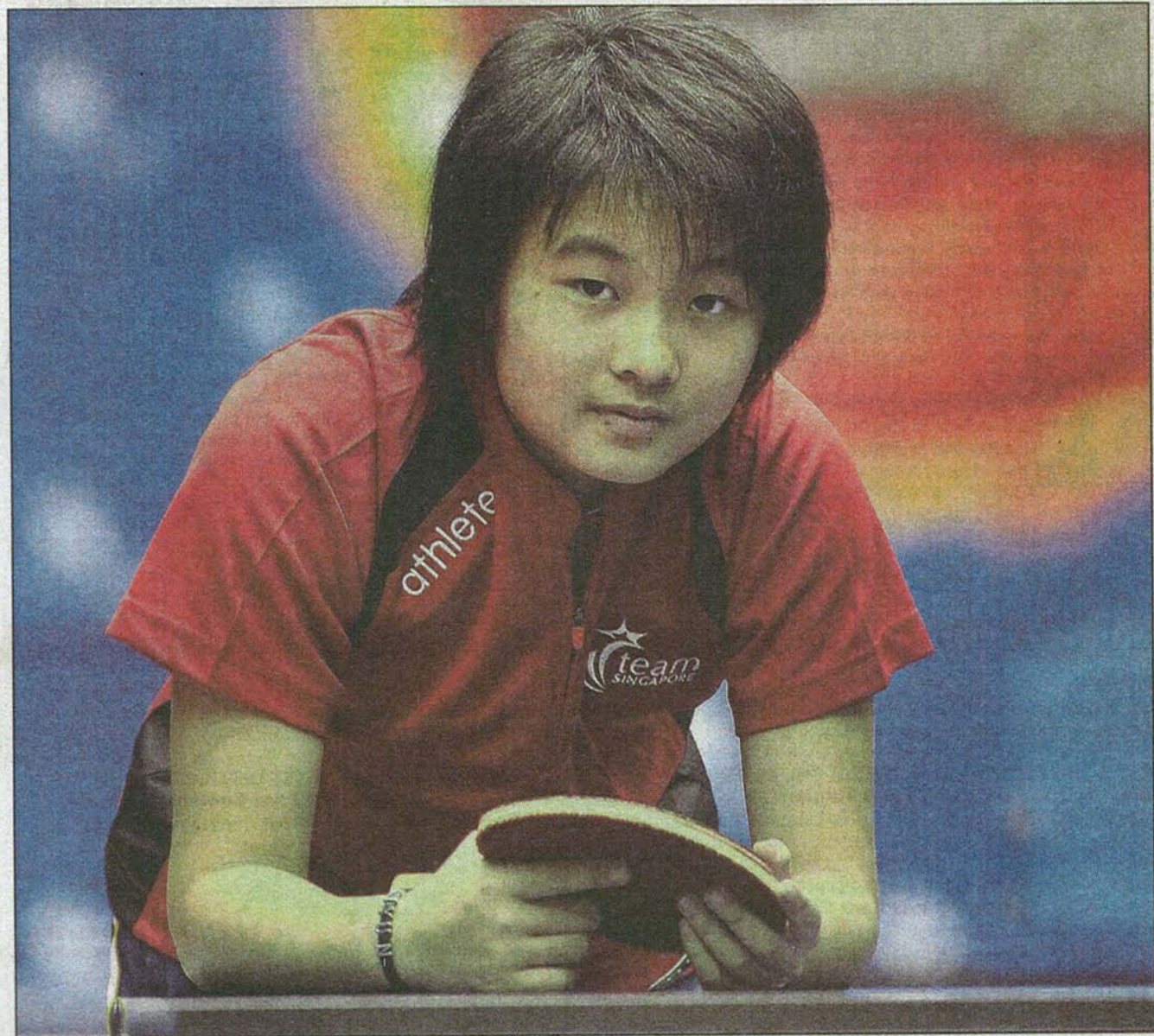
Then, in Primary 3, she discovered her real passion: table tennis.

Three months into the sport, she asked her coach to change her playing style to that of a chopper - a dying breed in the sport.

The Singapore Sports School (SSP) student, whose hair has since been cropped for a more sporty look, said: "Everyone plays the attacking style, so I thought it'd be fun to be a chopper."

Yes, Isabelle, one of four Singaporean paddlers set to compete at next week's Asian Youth Games, is no ordinary teenager.

Studies aside, almost all her time is spent training and competing.



Isabelle Li is one of four Singaporean paddlers set to compete at next week's Asian Youth Games. Her ambition is to compete at the 2016 Olympics. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

She said: "I hope to be a contender one day. I don't want to be there just for the experience."

By her own admission, she is a poor loser.

The self-proclaimed perfectionist revealed: "Accepting defeat is one of the biggest challenges for me. When I was younger, I would cry after losing to my family members in card games like Monopoly and checkers."

Thankfully, the 2008 Commonwealth Youth Games singles champion has won more than she lost.

Asked what she likes about the sport, she said with a giggle: "I love to deceive players by imparting different spins to the ball. It's fun to see them frustrated when their shot finds the net or goes out of play... I'm probably a sadist!"

Chopping aside, one of her winning moves has been to switch her weapon of choice from the sword to the bat.

Wushu was among the many activities that she competed in, but none had the same allure as table tennis.

Mum and No. 1 fan Sim Kwang Hung, 48, recalled: "The moment she fell for table tennis, she was very serious about it - training 10 times a week. Even when she was sick, she'd insist on training."

Often, Isabelle would hit the ball against the wall at her five-room flat in Woodlands. It was then that the housewife realised that, unlike track and field, swimming and piano, table tennis meant serious business for her child.

Still, Isabelle manages to find time for others.

Said Ku Shi Ying, 14, her teammate and best friend: "She's an all-rounder. She helps me with my studies, especially Mandarin. When it comes to table tennis, she gives me pointers."

Becoming a better player is also Isabelle's aim, especially as she dreams of going to the 2016 Olympics.

"Table tennis is something that you can understand, but you can never perfect," she said. "There's always something that you can improve."

linxinyi@sph.com.sg

She recently returned from a two-month training stint in Zhengding, China. That meant spending time away from family and friends.

But the national youth team paddler is prepared to make sacrifices in her bid to be the local face of table tennis.

The sport has delivered the most success for Singapore in recent years, albeit with the contributions of foreign-born talent.

Already, the world No. 8 in the girls' Under-15 category has made her presence felt. At 11, she became the youngest paddler to represent Singapore at a senior level when she competed in the South-east Asian Table Tennis Championships in 2006.

More recently, she was one of the youngest competitors at April's World Table Tennis Championships, where she qualified for the main draw in the women's doubles.

Isabelle's face lit up when she spoke

AYG table tennis

Team Singapore

Isabelle Li: Girls' singles, mixed doubles and mixed team.

Chau Haiqing: Girls' singles, mixed doubles and mixed team.

Clarence Chew: Boys' singles, mixed doubles and mixed team.

Tay Jit Kiat: Boys' singles, mixed doubles and mixed team.