

1ST ASIAN YOUTH GAMES

Isabelle's not cowed by giants

Singapore Sports School paddler says pressure's off with underdog tag

LOW LIN FHOONG

linfhoong@mediacorp.com.sg

HER coach has singled her out as the best player in Singapore's table tennis team for the Asian Youth Games.

She will face off against the best young talent in Asia, and will be performing in front of family and friends, but Isabelle Li is taking it all in stride.

The team met members of the media yesterday at Toa Payoh Sports Hall, and Isabelle said: "I've played a lot of the Asian countries on the junior circuit and the experience has helped.

"Table tennis is an 11-point game so there's still a chance of an upset. There's also less pressure when you're the underdog."

The table tennis competition begins at the revamped Toa Payoh Sports Hall next Wednesday. Four events – boys' and girls' singles, mixed doubles and mixed team

(two singles, mixed doubles) – will be contested in the six-day competition featuring players in the 14-15 age-group.

China, Japan, and South Korea are in the top tier of opponents as their teams are strong," said coach Xu Xiangdong.

"Singapore are in the second tier along with Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Indonesia, North Korea and India.

"The standards are very close between these teams, although North Korea have professional players who can throw up a few surprises."

Representing the Republic will be Raffles Girls' Secondary School pupil Chau Haiqing and Singapore Sports School students Clarence Chew, Tay Jit Kiat and Isabelle, all 14 years old.

The quartet have been training in Zhending, China, since March.

Xu singled out Clarence and Isabelle as stand-out members of the team.

Isabelle is ranked eighth in the ITTF's under-15 world rankings. She topped the 42-strong field at last year's Commonwealth Youth Games in Pune, India.

She clinched singles gold at the 2008

Isabelle's experience on the Asian junior circuit will stand her in good stead next week. KOH MUI FONG



International Children's Games and Taiyuan Open, and she took home a team silver and two bronze medals in the Under-15 girls' singles and doubles events at the recent South-east Asian Junior Table Tennis Championships in Bangkok.

The teenager also competed in the World Championships in Yokohama in April and the China Open earlier this month.

Isabelle will pair up with Clarence in the mixed doubles and mixed team event. The duo have been training together since January and competed at last year's National 'B' Division Championships and the Thailand Sports School Games, where they clinched the under-14 mixed doubles gold.

"We have a good chance in the mixed doubles and I'm aiming for a top-four finish," said Clarence.

"There is a big gap in standards between the male and female players for some countries, and it'll be hard for them to coordinate. But Isabelle and I are closer in standard, so it's easier for us to play together."

Coach Xu is not putting any undue pressure on his charges.

"The whole team's strength is better than last October when I first started as a coach here, but they are young and up against some professional players.

"My target is for them to go out there and just get a good result," he said.