



At 14, Isabelle Li will be one of the youngest players at the World Table Tennis Championships in Yokohama. ST FILE PHOTO

Teens making the step up

BY LIN XINYI

WHEN Isabelle Li steps into the Yokohama Arena tomorrow to play her first World Table Tennis Championships match against Iran's Anna Fayazian, she will not be bothered by the fact that, at 14, she is one of the youngest in the field.

Or that a significant portion of the 526 paddlers from 104 countries have more experience and bigger reputations.

Or that she has played on the senior Pro Tour circuit only once - at last year's Singapore Open.

After all, she has featured mostly on the ITTF World Junior Circuit, where she was crowned the cadet girls' singles champion in Brazzaville and Taiyuan.

Now, the world No. 8 in the girls' Under-15 category is ready for the big stage.

"I'm excited but also nervous," said Isabelle, a student at the Singapore Sports School. "This is a great chance for me. It's kind of stressful but I'm going to turn it into a form of motivation." Together with teammates Zena Sim,

"This competition is about the overall experience - to develop myself as a better player."

ISABELLE LI

18, and Pang Xuejie, 16, the trio will undergo a baptism of fire.

This is part of the Singapore Table Tennis Association's plan to develop local talent - an aim that has been high on the agenda under the stewardship of president Lee Bee Wah.

The paddlers all share a common goal: to make it to the main draw of the women's and men's singles respectively - where the world's best 128 paddlers will converge.

Fayazian and Bulgaria's Anelia Karova stand in Isabelle's way.

Zena, who is pursuing a diploma in sports management and exercise science

from the Auckland University of Technology, has been grouped with Ulrika Qvist of Monaco and Annie Yang of New Zealand.

Xuejie will take on Konstantin Parapanov of Bulgaria and Osvaldo Herrera of Honduras. Going into his biggest tournament to date, the Sports School student said: "I'm going to treat this tournament like any other tournament. My goal is to win as many matches as I can."

The paddlers said they have been feeling relatively relaxed leading up to the tournament, but that might soon change for Zena. "I expect to feel some tension in one or two days. This will be the biggest test for me," she said.

Besides getting match experience, the paddlers are also looking forward to watching the world's top stars in action.

Isabelle said: "It'll be good to learn from them. For me, being here is about the overall experience - to develop myself as a better player."

"Hopefully, it's the start of many World Championships to come."