

Braving the icy blast

Isabelle and Co give up home comforts in pursuit of Youth Olympic medals

LOW LIN FHOONG

linfhoong@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE — Spending Christmas in the minus-12 degree Celsius Hebei winter, 4,500km away from home and family, was no easy feat for table tennis player Isabelle Li.

But the 15-year-old Singapore Sports School student kept her eye on her mission: August's Youth Olympic Games (YOG).

Along with team-mates Clarence Chew and Tay Jit Kiat, she spent nearly two months from November till early this month in a centralised training camp in the northern Chinese province for the inaugural Youth Games, to be held in Singapore from Aug 14 to 26.

"During Christmas, I usually join my church for Christmas carolling, but I missed out last year ... It was difficult sometimes, as I was the only girl there and I missed my family. But overall, I enjoyed myself during the trip. And the most important thing was to train for YOG," she told MediaCorp earlier this week.

The youngsters embark on the ITTF Junior Circuit in Bah-

rain (Feb 1 to 5) and Egypt (Feb 9 to 13) next month, in what is part of a planned six-tour calendar for Singapore's Games hopefuls.

Resting on Isabelle's shoulders are the nation's medal hopes, for the Singapore Table Tennis Association (STTA) have set their sights on a bronze in the girls' singles.

Three categories — boys' and girls' singles and mixed team — will be contested at the YOG.

Eddy Tay, the association's high performance manager, singled out the teenager as the likely medallist, citing her performances at last week's Beijing Invitational and the Asian Youth Games last July.

"Isabelle has proven that she can match up with some of the world's best — she achieved her best under-15 ranking of No 7 last December, and did well on the ITTF Junior Circuit and Commonwealth Youth Games," said Tay.

"Each country is only allowed to enter one boy and one girl for the YOG, and there's a chance she can pull off an upset."

LEARNING FROM THE LOSSES

Currently ranked 39th among the world's under-18 paddlers, Isabelle put in an impressive display at the Beijing Invitational, which included senior players from China's provincial teams. She finished second in the quali-

fying group of 12 players before succumbing in the round of 16.

She emerged tops in the 42-strong field at the 2008 Commonwealth Youth Games, and followed it up with victories in the ITTF Junior Circuit in Ecuador, Argentina and Chile last year.

At the first Asian Youth Games last July, the mixed team of Clarence, Jit Kiat, Isabelle and Chau Haiqing clinched the bronze medal.

Isabelle came close to another bronze in the singles, but she lost to North Korea's Kim Song I in the quarter-finals.

The gutsy youngster has put the loss behind her. "During the Asian Youth Games, I learnt that I need more confidence during critical points, and playing against older players in the Beijing Invitational really helped.

"From now till the YOG, I'm training to be a more rounded player and adding attack to my game."

Following the ITTF Junior Circuits in Bahrain and Egypt, the YOG team, which also include Kerry Tan, Oscar Chau and Lam Teng Si, will fly to Italy and Malta for more ITTF tournaments, before heading to China for month-long training stints in May and July.

Also on the cards are the South-east Asia Junior Championships and Asian Junior Championships before the Youth Olympics.

Isabelle Li is tipped to bring home a medal at the Youth Olympic Games.

