

Singapore men's 420 pair in command

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SINGAPORE — Justin Liu and Sherman Cheng are in a strong position to claim Singapore's first International 420 World Sailing Championship in Haifa, Israel, after storming to the lead at the end of three of the 11 scheduled races in the final stage.

Racing in the men's gold fleet, the Republic's top 420 duo took advantage of relatively light-to-medium 12-knot winds to finish first, third and fourth and top the 42-strong field with 11 points.

Their third-place finish in the earlier six-race qualifier for the gold fleet are included in their

overall points tally.

They hold a three-point lead over Edoardo Mancinelli and Leonardo Cucchiara of Italy, followed by Thailand's Navee Thamsontorn and Atiwat Chomtongdee, who have 23 points.

Singapore have never won a world 420 title, and Cheng, 18, who won the 2006 Asian Games men's crown with 19-year-old Liu, admitted it is very much on their agenda.

"We came here with that goal in mind, but there are three more days to go and we hope to maintain our form," Cheng told MediaCorp from Haifa yesterday.

"Coming into today's races

well-rested after a day's break (on Tuesday), we used our boat speed and a low-risk race strategy to our advantage.

"But the race is still very open with five or six boats still capable of taking the title."

Leading races is nothing new to the pair, who won last month's Kiel Regatta in Germany. They have been in similar situations before, and mingling with teammates and watching DVDs in between races help them cope with the pressure.

The other men's 420 pair of Ko Chuan Yang and Andrew Paul Chan are in 36th spot after three races in the 41-strong silver fleet.



Cheng and Liu hold a three-point lead over their rivals. SINGAPORESAILING

The gold fleet competition for women completed only two races at press time. Singapore's three pairings of Denise Lim and Benita

Chua, Rachel Lee and Cecilia Low, and Griselda Khng and Sakina Mohd Halim were in 22nd, 23rd and 31st position, respectively.

Justin, Sherman off to flying start

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420 pair leads Gold fleet after three races

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JUSTIN Liu and Sherman Cheng began their bid for the men's world crown by taking the lead in the open category at the International 420 World Championship yesterday.

The pair of 19-year-olds came in first in the first race of their finals series and capped the day with third and fourth-placed finishes in Haifa, Israel.

The duo now lead the Gold fleet of the open championship with 11 points, with their main competitors during the qualifiers falling off the pace.

Qualification leaders Georgios Vasilas and Stamatia Fragiadaki, a mixed pair from Greece, got off to a poor start, coming in 30th in the first race and were disqualified from their second race before salvaging their day by finishing first in the last race of the day to finish in 10th.

French contenders Clement Ikhlef and Clement Pequín, who finished second in qualifying, ended their races in 37th, 19th and 32nd positions and dropped to 20th place.

Team manager Serena Wong was proud of the boys' performances.

"The boys were in good spirits when they came back from the water," Wong told The New Paper in a phone interview yesterday. "They're very happy with what they've put in."

"They had a good start and have been very consistent while remaining focused on themselves."

Despite the spotlight on them, the



PICTURE: SINGAPORESAILING

ON TRACK: The 420 pair of Sherman Cheng (in front) and Justin Liu took advantage of their rivals' stumble to surge ahead.

boys did not allow themselves to get carried away.

"Everyone's eyeing the boys and praising their performances," said Wong.

Humble

"People look up to them as strong competitors in this regatta.

"Yet they've remained very humble and are friendly with the other competitors. In fact they've been making many friends."

The last few days of sailing under the searing heat in Haifa have taken its toll on the field, but Liu and Cheng seem to have adapted well to the conditions in Haifa Bay.

"The waters looked pretty choppy from where I was," said Wong.

"But the boys said things were pretty much the same as the last few days, although the wind has not been as patchy as the last few days."

Wong revealed that a small change of plans on their rest day on Tuesday might have saved Liu and Cheng some precious energy for their assault on the world title.

"We went to the wrong mall and found out that the bowling alley was in another mall," said Wong.

"Although it was good for the squad to not stay couped up in their rooms all day, I'm glad that we didn't have such a tiring day out."

Meanwhile, the ladies had to endure a disappointing day with Rachel Lee/Cecilia Low, Denise Lim/Benita Chua and Griselda Khng/Sakina Mohd Halim finishing 19th, 28th and 32nd.