

PAIR THE HIGHEST-RANKED ASIAN TEAM IN NACRA 17

SAILORS BET ON OLYMPIC QUALIFIERS

Liu, Lim hope sacrifices pay off with Nacra 17 spot at Rio for Singapore sailing

ADELENE WONG
adelenewong@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE – They first hit it off as young sailors training with the national optimist team, and the relationship blossomed because of their mutual passion for the sport. Now 24, national sailors Justin Liu and Denise Lim are taking the next big step together. But it is not tying the knot they have an eye on, at least not just yet. Instead, the duo are pairing up in the Nacra 17 class in an effort to qualify for next year's Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.

Next month, they will travel to Qingdao, China, for the International Sailing Federation (ISAF) Sailing World Cup (Sept 14-20), which is earmarked as the Asian qualifiers for the Olympics. It is also the last chance for the sailors, who failed to make the cut at the 2014 and 2015 Nacra 17 World Championships in Spain and Denmark, respectively. To date, Singapore sailing has earned qualification spots in the women's laser radial and men's laser standard.

The Nacra 17 — which is set to

make its debut in Rio alongside the 49er FX — is the only Olympic sailing class with a mixed gender crew, and its double hull, triple sail boat is also the fastest among the pack and hits speeds of up to 56km an hour.

Liu, a world champion and two-time Asian Games winner in the 420, and Lim had tried their hand at the Nacra 17 at the 2014 Kieler Woche regatta, which was designated as a qualifying event for the 2014 Asiad Hobie 16 class. While they did not qualify for Incheon, both were hooked on the Nacra 17.

But the road to Rio has not been altogether smooth-sailing for the pair, who have had to fork out over S\$30,000 of their own money to fund their Olympic dream. Liu and Lim were initially partially funded by the Singapore Sailing Federation (SSF) for the first two regattas, but the sailors told TODAY they subsequently failed to meet the SSF's criteria to receive funding as they failed to meet the minimum performance ranking at the other regattas.

In response to queries, SSF high-performance manager Terence Koh



Singapore national sailors Denise Lim (left) and Justin Liu are attempting to claim a spot at the Rio Olympics on the Nacra 17-class boat.
PHOTO: ROBIN CHOO

said the pair's attempt at "qualifying at Qingdao will be partially funded".

The pair — who do not have a coach — have since gone on a three-month training tour of Europe, saving money by cooking their own meals.

"It has been a challenging journey so far, and one in which we have constantly amazed ourselves," said Liu, a third-year business and economics student at the National University of Singapore.

"There are people who cannot understand why we are doing this, but our parents are generally supportive, as are fellow national sailors who understand our passion. Denise has to work really hard and has some money working as a nurse, while I have used up all my savings to make this happen. It helps that we are pretty thrifty people. We currently have two equipment sponsors, and defi-

nately hope to have more."

Their determination is yielding dividends as they are now the highest-ranked Asian team in the Nacra 17 at world No 42, ahead of Japan's No 46 Hiroki Goto and Wakako Tabata. And it could pay off in Qingdao, if they top four Asian teams from Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and China and book a spot at the Rio Olympics for Singapore.

Said Lim: "We may have made sacrifices, but this whole journey has been an adventure and something we enjoy doing. We have a good chance. Japan are not far behind, and we have finished ahead of them at certain regattas. Then, there are two Hong Kong teams, and they are good in light wind conditions.

"If we don't make too many mistakes in Qingdao, we will be in serious contention for an Olympic spot."