

JUBILATION FOR SELF-FUNDED DUO

Qingdao regatta win the perfect reward for pair who could not afford a coach

May Chen

To say that a lot was on the line for sailors Justin Liu and Denise Lim at the Qingdao leg of the International Sailing Federation (Isaf) World Cup this past week is an understatement.

For starters, the regatta – designated as the Asian qualifier for next year’s Olympic Games for the Nacra 17 class – had just one qualifying spot up for grabs.

It was also the last-chance saloon for the Singapore duo, who have taken no-pay leave from work, paying their own way across Europe in a bid to earn that coveted Olympic spot. They missed the mark at last year’s Isaf World Championships in Spain, as well as this year’s Nacra 17 World Championships in Denmark.

But judging by the dominant manner in which they sailed all week at the same venue where the 2008 Beijing Olympics events were held, the light winds, strong currents and pressure failed to trouble them.

The pair posted 10 wins out of 13 races in the 10-strong fleet – including yesterday’s non-discardable, double-points medal race – to earn an Olympic berth for Singapore.

The victory is also a historic one, making them the first Singaporeans to win an Isaf World Cup event.

In a phone interview from China, Liu told *The Straits Times* that after a year of meticulous budgeting, they went in knowing Qingdao could well be the end of the road.



Singapore sailors Denise Lim and Justin Liu forked out about \$50,000 of their own money over the past year to fund their Olympic dream. Yesterday, they became the first Singaporean sailors to win at a World Cup leg while also enabling Singapore to qualify for the Rio Olympics next year. PHOTO COURTESY OF INTERNATIONAL SAILING FEDERATION

“We put everything that we had into this, up until Qingdao. Now we’re down to nothing,” he said.

The pair have forked out about \$50,000 of their own money – which includes savings and Lim’s salary as a nurse at Changi General Hospital – to fund their dreams.

Unable to afford a coach, it meant they had to train without one. The duo hired a coach only for the World Championships and the Qingdao regatta, and covered the

accommodation, expenses and the coach’s salary themselves.

Said Liu, a third-year undergraduate at the National University of Singapore: “We just tried to learn as much as we can on our own, spar with other teams and pick up things from them.

“It’s really hard when you don’t have someone on the outside to tell you what you’re doing right or wrong.”

Liu and Lim, both 24, were partial-

ly funded by the Singapore Sailing Federation early this year to take part in some regattas, but were cut after they did not meet the association’s criteria for funding.

Said Liu: “The whole experience has been really challenging, but it’s definitely worth it now. And it makes it much more satisfying when you’ve put in so much hard work and commitment.

“The No. 1 thing to do now is to talk to the federation and hopefully

work out a plan for the next year.”

Liu and Lim are currently the only ones in Singapore who sail the Nacra 17 on a regular basis, but will still have to go through internal trials before they can guarantee their spots. The Nacra 17 is a mixed-gender multi-hull event making its debut at the Rio Games.

This means Singapore will have at least six sailors competing at next year’s Games, on top of the single-handed Laser Standard and La-

ser Radial and the double-handed women’s 470.

The Republic will at least equal the number of representatives from the 2008 Games, when it was also represented by six sailors (a record) – in the men’s and women’s 470, Laser Standard and Laser Radial – with the qualifying window open and several still in the hunt for a spot in the men’s 470 and 49erFX skiff.

maychen@sph.com.sg