

Exams or no, Li Yen can't wait for Olympic thrill

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BEFORE she could barely walk steadily, a then three-year-old girl began putting a spring in her steps after her first gymnastics session in a club in Cheras, Kuala Lumpur.

Today, 15 years later, those little steps have taken that girl, Au Li Yen, onto Sydney to become the first Malaysian gymnast to qualify for the Olympics.

Li Yen will be in Sydney as the highest ranked woman artistic gymnast in South-East Asia, and among the top 10 in Asia.

"I went for my first class when I was three, and then in Standard One, I started competing in my first competition," said Li Yen after her training session at the gymnasium at the National Sport Complex yesterday.

Li Yen went on to win a number of junior competitions for her primary school, SRJK (C) Kuan Cheng and then for her secondary school in Bukit Jalil. She also won all the (Kuala Lumpur Schools Sports Council) MSSKL and MSSM (Malaysian Schools Sports Council) titles.

After three years at the Bukit Jalil Sports School, Li Yen decided to leave the school because she was not happy with the way things were run there.

She subsequently returned to the school for half a year to prepare for the world championships in Tainjin, where she eventually finished 66th out of 260, and then went on to study at SMK Bukit Bandaraya in Bangsar.

It was her finish in the world championships that earned her the wildcard entry for the Sydney Olympics.

Now she continues to train tirelessly each day for at least three and a half hours a day, six days a week with Ukrainian coach Eduard Nechai in preparation for the Olympics.

But her Olympic aspirations may come with a heavy price. All those hours and days in training and competitions have left her with little time to prepare for her SPM examinations this year.

"I have missed so much school, with training stints and competition ... I don't know how I am going to sit for my SPM," said Li Yen, who is a science student.

"I find that I have been left behind in school, that I don't quite understand everything. I hope to use the one-month after the Olympics to study as much as I can."

Right now, the spotlight is on her, and with the expectations of the gymnastics fraternity weighing heavily on her shoulders, Li Yen is feeling the pressure.

"I wish that people will understand that I know where I stand. Being ranked 66th in the world, you cannot expect me to win a medal. Some people say I don't believe in myself, but this is not the case ... let's face the facts, I cannot jump to first, second or third rankings overnight ... it doesn't work that way.

"I know people expect things from me that I cannot deliver. Also, there has been certain targets set for me (scores) by certain people.

"There has been so much hype in this Olympics, people giving me money and inviting me for functions. The more they do that, the more I feel I owe it to them to do well.

"Then there are my parents' expectations for me to do well in my SPM examinations."

Another dilemma that Li Yen is facing is whether or not to quit gymnastics next year, or to compete in the Sea Games in Kuala Lumpur.

"Maybe I will quit, I don't know yet. But If I quit, it will be because of studies. But I am still undecided on next year's Sea Games as the country has limited gymnasts and I would like to compete in it."

While she admits that even if she stays on, it will be for a maximum of another two years or less, with age catching up.

"Gymnasts usually quit when they are 19-20 years old. I think the oldest gymnast in the world is 20 at the highest level. It is meant for the young, not like say bowling where you go on till you're 50 years old."

Right now, she is taking each day as it comes, her focus solely on the coming Olympics.

"After my SPM examinations, I will discuss with my parents on my future plans. I would like to do physiology, I don't know what it branches out to, but maybe food nutrition or maybe help out athletes in the future," said Li Yen.

What Li Yen, with her hectic schedule, misses most is spending time with her friends and family.

"Some of my friends do not understand, they tell me, why are you doing this, why do you spend so much time on gymnastics. You don't get more than two days off, even on Chinese New Year, and I am the kind of person who loves socialising."

Li Yen will be leaving for Sydney on Wednesday, and she is now preparing herself mentally and physically to give her best in the Sydney Olympics.

While the chances of her winning a medal is realistically slim, the lass has opened the door for Malaysian gymnastics by qualifying for the event.