

For the first time since 1999, shooters have swept the Best School Boy and Girl awards at the National Schools Colours awards. Commonwealth Games medallists Zhang Jin and Vanessa Yong received the honours yesterday from Minister of State for Education, Rear-Admiral Lui Tuck Yew.

THE QUIET BOY

By NICHOLAS FANG

THEIR birthdays fall within three days in September, but shooters Zhang Jin and Vanessa Yong have starkly different personalities.

Vanessa is bubbly. Her teammate and fellow Commonwealth Games medallist Jin is quiet, bookish and almost a wallflower.

This year's Best Schoolboy at the National Schools Colours Awards turns up for the interview with The Straits Times in his light-brown Hwa Chong Institution school uniform and grey shoes.

He has a casual Casio G-Shock watch on his wrist.

He nearly slips into the room unnoticed. His bulky air-rifle case announces his arrival.

He speaks so quietly that one has to strain to catch his replies, which rarely exceed 10 words.

It would not be surprising to hear him say that he likes shooting because it allows him to fire hundreds of shots in solitude at the range each day.

Instead, the 18-year-old says he likes the sport because it allows him to hang out with his friends.

The JC2 student picked up shooting at Anglo-Chinese School (Independent).

But he moved to HCI because national-squad members Samuel Tham, Melvin Tan and Commonwealth Games teammate Ong Jun Hong are studying there.

"I chose to go to Hwa Chong because of the large contingent of shooters there," he said.

"We enjoy hanging out after training, and we watch movies together, eat and chat."

He was thrilled to receive the Best Schoolboy award yesterday.

"It is great because it recognises my training and the sacrifices my family have gone through," he said.

His father, business executive Chong Fah Shang, 52, and mother, housewife Chan Mo Yu, in her 40s, have always supported his sporting pursuits.

He started shooting in Secondary 1. In the first two years, he juggled it with Optimist sailing.

"I had been sailing since Primary 5 at the Singapore Armed Forces

Yacht Club, but in Sec 2 I decided to switch to shooting," he said.

"Optimist sailing's age-limit is 15. I wanted to do something that I could pursue for a long time."

Sailing's loss is shooting's gain. Jin has brought back two bronze medals from two South-east Asia Games, and a silver and bronze from the Melbourne Commonwealth Games.

He reveals that the Olympics is his long-term goal.

"Shooting is different from other sports because it doesn't have many school-level competitions," he said.

"We focus more on preparing for overseas competitions, such as the Commonwealth and Asian Games.

"Students from different schools train together.

"I like the times we spend training and pushing each other."

He is pre-occupied by this year's A-Level examinations, so he has been training only once a week for December's Asian Games in Doha.

The triple-science student is focusing on his studies, which he had neglected in the build-up to the Commonwealth Games earlier this year.

"I'm not focusing on medals at the Asian Games," he said.

"I just want to keep improving my technique, each time I shoot.

"The results will follow."

Wise words from a young athlete, hailed as the best among his peers.

VANESSA Yong would be a "kancheong spider" (slang for anxious and easily excitable person) if it were not for shooting.

This year's Best Schoolgirl at the National Schools Colours Awards believes that the intense concentration and focus required of a shooter has curbed her tendency to panic under pressure.

"The sport is actually very good for young people because it teaches them how to be calm mentally," said the 18-year-old Hwa Chong Institution student.

"I used to be a kancheong spider, but now I am less prone to it."

She has obviously found her calling in the sport, bagging two bronze medals at this year's Commonwealth Games and a silver at last year's South-east Asia Games.

But Vanessa, who is in her final year of junior college, is still a bundle of girlish energy.

Giggling is something she does frequently during the interview.

Dressed in a classic white T-shirt and black three-quarter pants highlighted with chunky colourful jewellery, she is distressed when she has to smile for the camera.

"My gums are big, so you must help me choose the nicest photos okay?" she pleaded repeatedly with the photographer.

She also insists on seeing each picture on the photographer's digital camera, and pointing out the ones she likes.

Asked about her boyfriend, she would only say that he is 20

years old and that they have been going out for a year.

She dreams of opening a clothes shop. But this girl is certainly no bimbo.

Her drive to learn new things motivates her to excel at shooting.

She said: "I am happiest when I learn something new from my coach. We just got a new coach, Zhang Manzhen from China.

"He has a lot to teach us, so I love coming to training these days to see what I can learn."

Patrick, her 47-year-old businessman father, and mum Doris Tan, who is in her early 40s and works in the quality assurance line, have been her pillars of strength.

Said Vanessa: "They have been very supportive of my shooting ever since I started in Sec 1 at Ahmad Ibrahim Secondary School."

Naturally, her parents are overjoyed with her early success.

Said her mum: "It's great that she has done so well after only six years of training.

"The sport has definitely helped her mature and calm her down over the years, although it is sometimes difficult to balance both training and studying."

Vanessa agrees, adding that her school has helped a lot by providing remedial classes. These allow her and her fellow shooters to catch up on their studies if they fall behind because of overseas competitions.

Talk about school and her upcoming A-Level examinations puts a dampener on her effervescence.

Asked how her preparations are going, she replied softly: "It's going okay at the moment, but I'm not sure how the results will turn out."

She perks up again when talk turns towards her plans.

"I'm not sure how long I will keep up with competitive shooting, but I hope to be around for the 2008 Olympics.

"I will always shoot for fun. One day I hope to bring my own children to the range," she said, once again breaking out into girlish laughter.

Vanessa is definitely one bubbly girl who can afford to smile, thanks to her outstanding achievements on the shooting range.

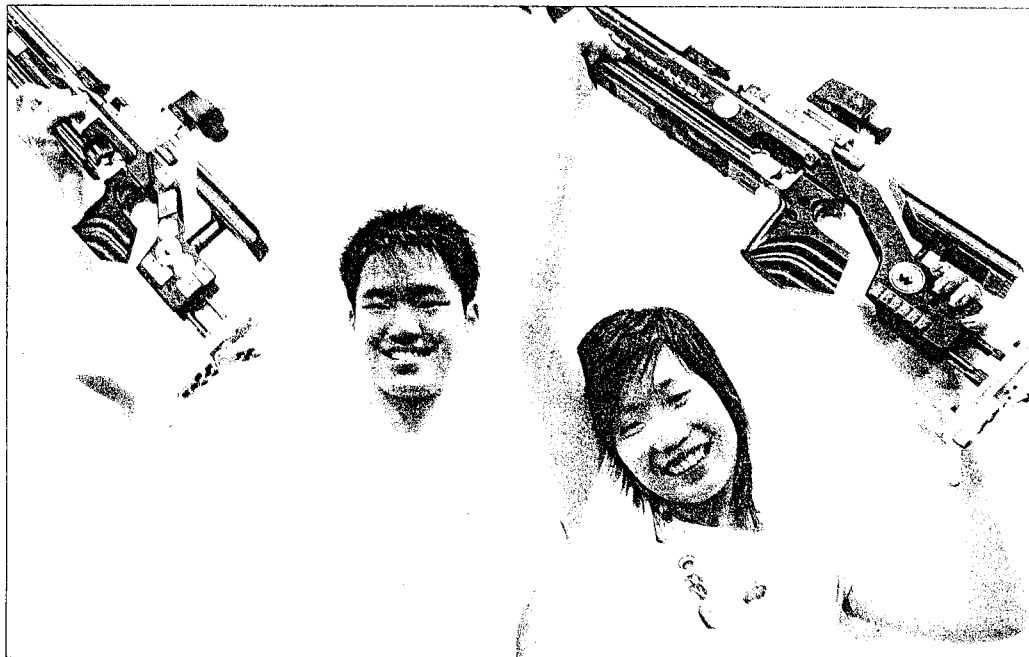


PHOTO: ALBERT SIM

HWA CHONG INSTITUTION'S PRIDE: Best Schoolboy Zhang Jin and Best Schoolgirl Vanessa Yong, both shooters who excelled at the Commonwealth Games.

NICHOLAS FANG