Getting ahead of the geeks

Olivia Chiu, Singapore’s first iWhiz, didn’t let her lack of IT experience stop her from emerging tops in the reality game show, and even snagged a new boyfriend to boot. LIM YEE HUNG finds out what makes her the winner.

Olivia, 19, survived nine rounds and then beat two challengers, including her boyfriend, in the finals.

Winning the iWhiz infocomm reality game show was no mean feat for Olivia Chiu.

The idea of the 10-episode series, aired weekly on Channel 5 from Feb 5 to yesterday, was to unearth Singapore’s own Bill Gates in the making.

Olivia, 19, had to survive nine harrowing elimination rounds, and then beat two other challengers – one of them her boyfriend Tay Kang Xun – in the finals.

All to win a geek’s dream prize of an all-expenses-paid trip to computer giant Microsoft’s headquarters in Redmond.

And she’s not a geek.

The bubbly Olivia describes herself as a regular teenager who loves shopping and watching movies, and confesses that the most geeky activity she is guilty of is blogging.

The Singapore Management University (SMU) undergraduate began learning the finer points of IT only four months ago, after she began her degree course in information systems management this year.

Her lack of IT experience raises the question: did iWhiz fulfill its aim of unearthing “the next Bill Gates”?

The answer is yes, according to chief judge Lee Kwok Cheong, chairman of the Infocomm Manpower Council. “We are not looking out for people with just technical ability,” Mr Lew told Digital Life. “The judges wanted someone who has the soft skills to leverage on IT to make an impact as well.”

He pointed out Olivia’s strong performance during the final episodes, when she displayed creativity in coming up with IT solutions to the problems posed to her, as well as the marketing skills to pitch her product to businesses.

For instance, the final episode required the contestants to create a Web portal where consumers could find out the latest promotions for shops at the Heeren. This was evaluated by nine trial testers.

Olivia came up with an intuitive interface, and also managed to secure the cooperation of most of the shops on her designated level.

Her fellow finalists agreed that she was a deserving winner. Fong Hui Fen, 18, praised her communication skills while working as a team and with businesses, while Kang Xun acknowledged that she was “much more creative” than he was when it came to generating ideas.

Reluctant contestant

Olivia, who had no intention of joining iWhiz at first. However, she was talent-spotted during the auditions held at the SMU campus, after she entered the auditioning room “to ask the producers if they needed water”.

Kang Xun, Olivia’s course-mate at SMU, also joined iWhiz by chance. He did not sign up for the game show initially, and all 12 contestants had already been chosen. As luck would have it, one of them dropped out before filming began and Kang Xun was roped in, despite being two years older than the age limit of 19 set for applicants.

Perhaps, it was what they shared in common that brought Olivia and Kang Xun together, and the pair started dating during the course of iWhiz.

They also survived a tense final episode when they competed against each other and Hui Fen. They are now an item.