

# Paige playing to be young star on court

By Mark Dawson

She's only 14, but Paige Hourigan's passport is already collecting an impressive array of stamps. The Marton schoolgirl's tennis exploits have taken her to India and Malaysia, and the Czech Republic should be next on her list.

New Zealand's under-14 hardcourt champion and under-16 doubles champ, she has just returned from the Asia Oceania qualifying event for the World Junior Tennis Finals.

Having lost to Thailand but beating the Philippines and Kazakhstan in the Indian leg of the event, Paige and her teammates then moved to Kuching in Malaysia for a return match with the Thais. It wasn't just revenge on offer in the quarter-final showdown - at stake was a place in the world finals.

First on court were the No2 singles, where Kiwi Rosie Cheng went down to Thailand's Yada Vasupongchai in straight sets.

That put New Zealand No1 Paige in a must-win position against Apiramon Nakornkan in the best-of-three contest.

But the Nga Tawa Diocesan student insists she didn't feel any extra pressure on her young shoulders.

"It was a tough match, particularly because it was about 39 degrees and really humid," she said. Despite losing the first set, the girl from Turakina stayed cool as a cucumber to win 2-6, 6-3, 6-2 and square the tie.

She then teamed with Cheng for a straight sets doubles triumph that put New Zealand in the world finals which will be held in the Czech Republic in August.

Though the Kiwis lost to Korea and China in the semifinal and third-place playoff, it was mission accomplished.

Now Paige will have to wait and see if she is chosen for the New Zealand team. If she is, there is more globetrotting in store. The Czech courts are clay, which she has never played on before, so training stints in the Netherlands and Germany are planned to get the team used to the surface. A tennis player from the age of 5, she has dreams of turning professional and perhaps emulating her favourite player, Belgian ace Kim Clijsters, winner of four grand slam titles and a former world No1.

To that end, she does two hours practice every day with her coach Luis Lurna in Feilding, and 45 minutes fitness work.

Her studies aren't allowed to take a back seat and she took homework with her to India and Malaysia. Although she confesses she didn't manage to finish it.