

# Singapore Government **PRESS RELEASE**

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OPENING ADDRESS BY DR GOH KENG SWEE,  
THE FIRST DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER OF EDUCATION,  
AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE TANAH MERAH COUNTRY CLUB  
ON SATURDAY, 17 MARCH 1984 AT 6.30 PM

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May I add my commendations to those of Mr Sim Kee Boon's and Mr Dennis Lee's on the dedicated band of people who conceived of this idea and brought it into fruition, as a result of which we are happily gathered here tonight.

When I have to speak on occasions such as this, I prefer to avoid the usual pleasantries and trivia and address some fundamental questions. I propose to do so now. The great issue I want to discuss is this:- "Why do we play golf?"

Various reasons have been advanced and I propose to examine these in turn and to convince you that they are all fallacious. A common reason given by the busy executive or harassed professional is that it refreshes the mind and this way makes him more productive when he returns to his work. This reason can be rejected out of hand. Better results can be achieved at less cost in time and money by, for instance, transcendental meditation or even by yoga exercises.

Then there is the health reason. Again this is easy to demolish. Why spend four-and-a-half hours during which you spend most of the time standing around while others whack at the ball? Why not just walk briskly for one-and-a-half hours? Better still why not swim 20 lengths in the Club's swimming pool? These exercises again cost less in time and money and are more beneficial to your health.

If the utilitarian reasons - mental relaxation and physical health - for playing the game have been found to be not cost-effective solutions, the golfer must shift his argument to non-utilitarian grounds. We enjoy the game.

A moment's thought will convince the honest golfer that this is manifestly untrue. I concede that once a while, as a result of good fortune or divine intervention, we enjoy the game when the putts go in, the wood shots are long and straight and the irons do what they are supposed to do. We then believe we have mastered the game. Needless to say, this mood of euphoria does not last long. Golf is a humbling game, as a great Scottish professional said a hundred years ago.

How often, as we go through the fairways, have we heard cries of anguish from golfers, in a nearby green, who had just missed a two-foot putt? How often have we ourselves sliced a ball into the numerous ponds in this golf course? I have often seen parties of four golfers grimly walking through the fairways, never talking to one another, going about their game in silent determination. How can this be said to be enjoyment?

If rational explanations cannot account for why people play golf, we must seek irrational explanations. Here, I must confess that I wish my colleague, Mr Rajaratnam had taken to the game. He has much greater understanding of abnormal psychology than I have and has a keener insight into why people behave in irrational ways.

For what it is worth, here is my explanation of why people punish themselves by playing golf. It is not, I affirm, that golfers are masochistic in their psychological make-up. All golfers I know are perfectly normal. What is more, they are successful in their professions or their businesses. Herein lies the key to the solution of our problem. Now my argument is rather complicated and you will have to concentrate.



The make-up of the human mind is the result of evolution through hundreds of thousands of years as our ancestors progressed through their perilous evolutionary journey in the face of great dangers from predators much stronger than they are - the saber-toothed tiger for instance. Those who learnt to hunt in groups survived and hence group loyalty became a human instinct. As human beings progressed from the hunting stage to pastoral societies, keeping domesticated animals as a food supply, wild animals no longer formed the main threat. Pastoral tribes contest for grazing rights and wars between tribes became frequent. As our ancestors settled in farming communities and as tribal societies grew into nation states, wars became larger in scale and more ferocious.

One result of these internecine wars among our ancestors is that the impulse to aggression became inbuilt into human minds because aggressive societies have better chances of survival than timid ones in the Darwinian process of survival of the fittest.

As our ancestors progressed from agricultural societies into modern industrial states, life became more complex and demanding. Intellectual skills acquire a premium in the mastery of both scientific achievement and business organisation. What has remained largely unnoticed, except perhaps by Freudian psychologists, is that as modern life became highly competitive and complex, a premium also developed in the ability to withstand stress and frustration. Those without this ability go under, regardless of how able they are in other respects.

I said a moment ago that golfers are successful in their professions or business and this gives the clue to the question I posed "Why do we play golf?" Let me now tie the threads of my argument together. We have succeeded in life because we have a demonstrated ability to withstand stress

and frustration. However, after a period of success in business or the professions, and as the initial difficulties are overcome, the level of stress and frustration declines, often quite rapidly.

This can have harmful effects on a man's psyche. He becomes careless, even bored. He can even get fretful for reasons he cannot understand, ie, the level of stress and frustration which he was used to on the way up is no longer there. He may take to bad habits like gambling or heavy drinking, or even womanising. However, if this person decides to take up golf, he suddenly rediscovers the old challenges of dealing with stress and frustration though in a new form. A vacuum that threatens to engulf his life disappears as he hacks his way through the rough, blunders into bunkers and misses crucial three-foot putts. What could be more stressful when the esteem of your partner and your own self esteem depends on whether you sink that five footer on the 18th green.

Well, I think I have put out an interesting theory in abnormal psychology. Whether it will stand up to rigorous examination by the experts I don't know and frankly don't care either. At least it has the merit of being good for our egos. To put it in a nutshell the answer to the question :- "Why do we play golf?" is "It is good for the soul."

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