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SPEECH BY MR BERNARD CHEN, MINISTER OF STATE FOR DEFENCE AT
THE 9TH COLOURS AWARD CEREMONY ORGANISED BY THE SCHOOLS
SPORTS COUNCIL ON SATURDAY, 23 FEBRUARY 1980 AT RAFFLES
INSTITUTION HALL, GRANGE ROAD AT 1000 HOURS

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May I first of all congratulate the 167 students who have been awarded colours for their participation and outstanding performance in a wide range of sporting activities. However, I cannot help but notice that they form only a very small percentage of the total student population of 175,000 secondary and pre-university students. While it is not our intention to make everyone a champion, it is important for us to make sure that through mass participation, all our students should have an opportunity to take part in sports and games that will strengthen their physical well-being.

Every year, the Singapore Armed Forces take in most of the young men of 18 years of age into National Service. They come in all shapes and sizes. There is, however, a marked characteristic amongst these youngsters. Except for a minor percentage, most of the national service enlistees have been found to be physically unfit and many of them could not even pass the basic fitness tests prescribed for the new recruits. You may argue that the standards of fitness has been set too high. I think the high failure rates are due to several other factors.

First, many of the sports and games now being promoted in schools do not help to improve overall physical fitness. Exceptions could be swimming and body contact games. As a result, we may find that while the youngsters can play

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football well, they cannot do pushups and chinups because of their weak arms. Second, many youngsters do not have the stamina to do well in endurance tests. This can be due to the lack of frequent and regular exercises while they were still in school. Many of our young recruits cannot even complete a 2 km run when they first come to the SAF.

Several consequences follow from this lack of physical fitness. SAF has to allocate some time to build up the fitness level of its enlistees. This time could have been used more productively in providing the men with other training if they are already fit on entry to the SAF. The men themselves would also find the transition from civilian to military life more bearable. Much of the complaint about tough training in the SAF is not because of the stringent standards set but stems from the fact that the men are not ready for the training. If they can handle the physical demands well, the national servicemen will be better able to adapt themselves to army life and benefit more from the training they receive. On the other hand, if they find difficulty in coping, they will consider physical fitness as just another chore they have to perform little knowing that they are keeping fit for themselves and not for the SAF. This mentality is carried right through national service into reserve service. As a result, we find that while the national servicemen keep themselves in trim during their stay in SAF, more out of coercion than of habit, they give up on completing their service and return to their old sloppy ways. The efforts that we have expended to

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make them into good and healthy specimens are thus completely wasted.

Students spend on the average 10 years of their lives in schools. It is at this impressionable age that we must inculcate in them the value of keeping both their minds and bodies fit and healthy so that when they leave school, they would be imbued with the knowledge to understand the true meaning of physical fitness and how to go about maintaining it.

The SAF has a vested interest in ensuring that the physical fitness amongst our young population is maintained at a high level for the reasons I have mentioned earlier. The Defence Ministry in conjunction with the Ministry of Education has embarked on a series of programmes to meet this physical fitness objective.

First, the SAF will be providing to schools, sports and games instructors especially those which are more robust and involve body contact to help stimulate students' interests in these sports. Second, to expose students to outdoor living and thus get them away from the cloistered and high rise living, the SAF has organised 5-day adventure training courses for secondary school students at the Outward Bound School in Pulau Ubin. Last year, a total of 1,121 participated. The students' response to this course has been most encouraging. 13 more courses involving 4,160 students will be conducted this year. This course only

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serves to expose the students to outdoor lives that most of our urbanised youngsters have not tasted. They will sample more of this when they get into national service.

SAF is also putting more emphasis on physical fitness in its selection of national servicemen for officer cadet and NCO training. Priority for officer training is given to candidates who have good record in sports and games. Excellent physical fitness is considered a pre-requisite for officer cadet training. Those who participate in uniformed groups such as the National Cadet Corps will also enjoy priority in getting into the officer or NCO Corps. In this respect, the Defence Ministry is exploring the possibility and assigning more officers to schools as instructors to increase the level of participation in the National Cadet Corps.

Outside the schools, facilities are also provided at the various community centres to enable students and others, including reservists to keep themselves in trim. The Defence Ministry has installed keep-fit equipment in 20 community centres so that residents can use them to exercise regularly. Physical training instructors from the SAF are also posted to these centres to assist in training students who participate in the keep fit programmes. If these facilities prove to be popular, we will consider extending them to all other community centres.

Whatever measures the Government is prepared to take to encourage our population to keep fit, it is the people themselves who will have to make full use of the opportunities and facilities to cultivate a life long habit to keep themselves healthy and trim. The sooner we start doing this, the better it will be for us. Otherwise, we may find ourselves in a position that by the time we realise the importance of keeping fit, it will be too late for us to respond. As leaders in sports and games in the schools, I hope that you will serve as shining examples of what physical well-being can mean to all of us and spread the message to your friends and neighbours by the fine and exemplary way you keep yourselves fit physically and mentally.
