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SPEECH BY TAN ENG LIANG, CHAIRMAN, SINGAPORE SPORTS COUNCIL
AT THE OPENING OF THE MILO-ASCOT FIRST ASIAN JUNIOR SQUASH TEAM
CHAMPIONSHIPS AT THE EAST COAST RECREATION CENTRE ON 1 FEB 83
AT 5.00 PM

1982 could be singled out as the watershed in squash development in Singapore. It was the year in which the Second World Junior Squash Team Championship was successfully held here. In more ways than one, squash in Singapore came of age with that championship and Singapore found itself in the record book of the International Squash Rackets Federation (ISRF) as a venue for a major international event.

Soon after the staging of the world event, Singapore is pleased to have the opportunity to host the Milo-Ascot First Asian Junior Squash Team Championships. I commend the officials of both the Malaysian and Singapore Squash Associations for putting up a successful bid at the Asian Squash Federation meeting to stage the individual and team events, respectively. Owing to their far-sightedness, young squash players of Asia now have a further avenue to hone their skills under exacting conditions.

The World and Asian Junior Championships aside, the East Asia Squash Championship is the most prestigious tournament in this region. Singapore has done exceptionally well in this competition since its inception. Our players have been riding the crest of success and earning individual and team honours. With several wins to our credit, there is always the tendency to become complacent, especially when Singapore finds itself undisputed

champions. This complacency is reinforced by the fact that the Singapore players have seldom been seriously threatened by opposition.

I wish to remind you of a truism in sport which says that it is harder to remain as champions than to become champions. It is always a difficult task to stay ahead of competitors in fitness, skills and experience because these factors are in constant flux.

Singapore had a head start in squash in this region. The squash bug hit us earlier than our neighbouring countries. This head start allowed us to remain on top for a number of years. But I am afraid the advantages of this pole position are slowly being eroded. Interest in squash in East Asia has grown quickly and the gap in the standard of play between Singapore players and those in this region is being narrowed.

For example, Malaysian under-19 squash players have improved tremendously over the last few years. Prior to 1981 there was hardly a Malaysian junior player capable of toppling a Singapore player. But times have changed. Malaysia has now beaten Singapore twice since the annual competition between the two countries was inaugurated in 1981. Only in last year's World Junior Championship did Singapore salvage some pride when our team overcame Malaysia by a 3-0 margin.

With this in mind, 1983 is as good a time as any to take stock of our leadership position and strive to remain as squash champions. If we are not careful, our squash is in real danger of suffering the same fate that befell Singapore badminton more than

two decades ago. At that time, Singapore produced some of the best badminton players in Asia and the world. But shuttlers in other countries learned quickly, sharpened their skills and finally overtook us in the very game we excelled. Once overtaken we were not able to catch up with the leaders. It is sad to say that we have yet to recover this lost position. Squash should learn from this setback that badminton experienced.

The Singapore Sports Council is concerned with the fast progress made by players in East Asia. The competition gets tougher each year. To help the Singapore Squash Racquets Association, the Singapore Sports Council with a contribution of \$20,000, has joined hands with Milo and Ascot to support the national squad training. The budget for this year's overall training comes to \$80,000. The Singapore Sports Council is pleased that part of this money - about \$50,000 - is being put to good use with the engagement of a full-time coach in Martin Webb of Wales. Besides training, an East Asian tour will be organised to give deserving players more overseas exposure. Nearly \$16,000 have been set aside for this purpose.

I would like to thank Milo and Ascot for sponsoring this championships to the tune of \$35,000 each. For the next few days we are going to witness squash of a high calibre. I wish all competing teams every success. It is now my pleasure to declare the Milo-Ascot First Asian Junior Squash Team Championships open.