

ALREADY 80, PROF JAYAKUMAR STILL TEES UP STRONG

FORMER DEPUTY PM SAW BENEFITS OF GOLF TO CARRY HIM THROUGH POLITICS, NOW ENJOYS THE GAME AS A HEALTHY PASTIME



**SWING
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BY DARRYL WEE

As the saying goes, “I know him but he does not know me”, and little did I expect our paths to cross because of golf.

Like many Singaporeans, I knew of Professor S. Jayakumar as politician, diplomat and our former Deputy Prime Minister.

I had seen “Prof” numerous times at the golfers’ terrace at Sentosa Golf Club on weekends, and one day, a common friend called and asked if I would be interested in joining them for a game as another friend had pulled out.

Due to the golfing official secrets act, I will have to withhold the various candid conversations and stories we had.

However, I can honestly say that for someone, who has completed his 80th birthday, I found him exceptionally sharp, witty and genuinely kind.

Still very competitive, there is always a small wager on our game which starts with the usual negotiation of strokes.

I was very excited when Prof agreed to be featured in this Interview Series as I felt that looking at the game from the lens of a diplomat would be something different from the lens of business leaders and professional golfers.

What can be seen from his interview was how golf was instrumental in helping advance diplomacy for Singapore.

SWING: How did you get started in golf?

Prof: I took up golf around 1987 when I was Minister for Home Affairs. I had thought golf was an awful waste of time. However, I had a problem on my hands. I had many visiting dignitaries, especially from Asean countries, who were very keen to play golf.

I had to plead with other Cabinet colleagues to host games for them. Mr Goh Chok Tong then advised me to take up the game as it was a good way to forge closer links with our foreign counterparts. I heeded his advice and that is how I got started in golf.

Did golf prove to be helpful then, in terms of courting diplomatic relations?

Golf is useful for diplomacy, not because deals or breakthroughs in disputes are dramatically hammered out during games but more because golf is a valuable “ice-breaker”.

When you and a fellow diplomat or minister spend some four-and-a-half hours during the game, and



The friendly foursome of (from left) Yeo Cheow Tong, Prof S. Jayakumar, Ashok Kumar and Darryl Wee.

‘MY FAVOURITE COURSE IS THE TANJONG LAYOUT AT SENTOSA GOLF CLUB. FIRSTLY, IT IS A VERY WELL-MAINTAINED COURSE. SECONDLY, MANY OF MY GOLFING FRIENDS TEND TO PLAY THERE. THIRDLY, I HAVE HAD TWO HOLES-IN-ONE IN MY GOLFING HISTORY, AND BOTH OCCURRED AT THE TANJONG COURSE.’

additional time at meals before and after the game, inevitably you get to know each other on a personal basis.

The banter during the game, the team partnership against each other for a friendly bet – all lead to a sense of camaraderie. This way, a dignitary whom you might otherwise call “Mr Ambassador” or “Your Excellency”, soon becomes someone you feel comfortable calling by his first name.

I recall that in my time, most Asean Foreign Ministers played golf. They included Abdullah Badawi and Syed Hamid Albar of Malaysia, Ali Alatas of Indonesia, Bobby Romulo and Domingo Siazon of the Philippines, Kasem Kasemsri of Thailand, Somsavat Lengsavad of Laos, Pehin Lim Jock Seng of Brunei, to name a few.

Each year when we gathered in New York to attend the UN General Assembly sessions, we made it a point to arrange a golf game over one weekend.

One of my favourite stories about golf and diplomacy is how a midnight golf game in Brunei in 2003 between then PM Goh Chok Tong and former US President Bill Clinton, on the sidelines of APEC Leaders meeting, proved to be a pivotal event leading to the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (d: As written in his book, “Diplomacy – A Singapore Experience”, page 50).

What are personal pet peeves that irritate you on the golf course?

I guess it is slow play. As it is, golf is very time consuming. I tend to get impatient with slow players. But I have to be patient and remind myself that I too was once a beginner and tended to spray my golf ball over the course.

What is your favourite golf destination?

Thailand is always a nice destination. It is just a short flight away from Singapore. There are some excellent golf courses there. A player can have more than one caddie if he wishes unlike Singapore where caddies are a dying breed due to shortage of labour. If the day’s round of golf was disappointing, then at least we could look forward to an enjoyable dinner with delicious Thai cuisine.

What is your favourite golf course?

My favourite course is the Tanjong layout at Sentosa Golf Club. Firstly, it is a very well-maintained course. Secondly, many of my golfing friends tend to play there. Thirdly, I have had two holes-in-one in my golfing history, and both occurred at the Tanjong course.

What is your most memorable golfing experience?

When I was in-line skating at

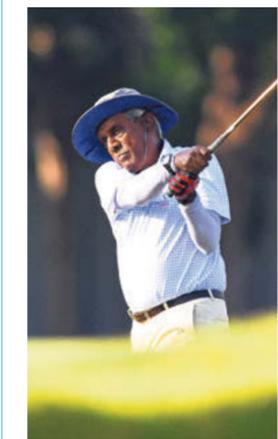
East Coast Park, I tumbled and fell, fracturing several bones in my left wrist. The doctors told me that it would take some six to eight months to heal and that I should not use my left hand to bear any weight. So, they told me to strictly lay off golf that entire period. I thought to myself, “Not to play golf for half a year. That was not an option.”

I looked up videos on Google and YouTube and came across numerous inspiring accounts of disabled people including amputees playing golf. Some had only one hand, some had only one leg. Indeed there was a guy without hands who tucked the golf club under his chin and shoulder. Quite amazing what they could do, through sheer determination and practice.

These stories motivated me to go to the range and try hitting balls with just my right hand only. It was most frustrating and not easy at all. I persevered. After two weeks or so, I found that I could hit the ball with my driver some 70-80 metres.

Pretty soon, I told my friends that I could come back to the game using only my right hand for all clubs, including the putter. My friends were very sympathetic and supportive at first. They offered generous strokes, like one stroke for par-threes, one-and-a-half stroke for par-fours and two strokes for par-fives.

However, when they found to their horror that I was winning more bets playing with one hand, their sympathy and generosity of strokes disappeared amazingly fast.



Photos: Tharm Soek Wai