

He is the president of UBS Asia-Pacific, a position that is highly respected and recognised.

But the affable Edmund Koh is such a down-to-earth personality that he knows how to connect with the big-wigs and the ordinary men.

I first met Edmund when he approached my golf group to say “hello” during a makan break. I was just introduced to him but he made me feel welcome and comfortable.

He has this ability to connect with people so easily, and I was not surprised to discover that he was in banking.

When I played a round of golf with him subsequently, I discovered that he had a knack for knowing exactly how far he could needle each of us, which created such an enjoyable day out.

One may be remiss in assuming that Edmund’s secret power is his interpersonal skills, however I would say that behind each of his relationships is his caring character.

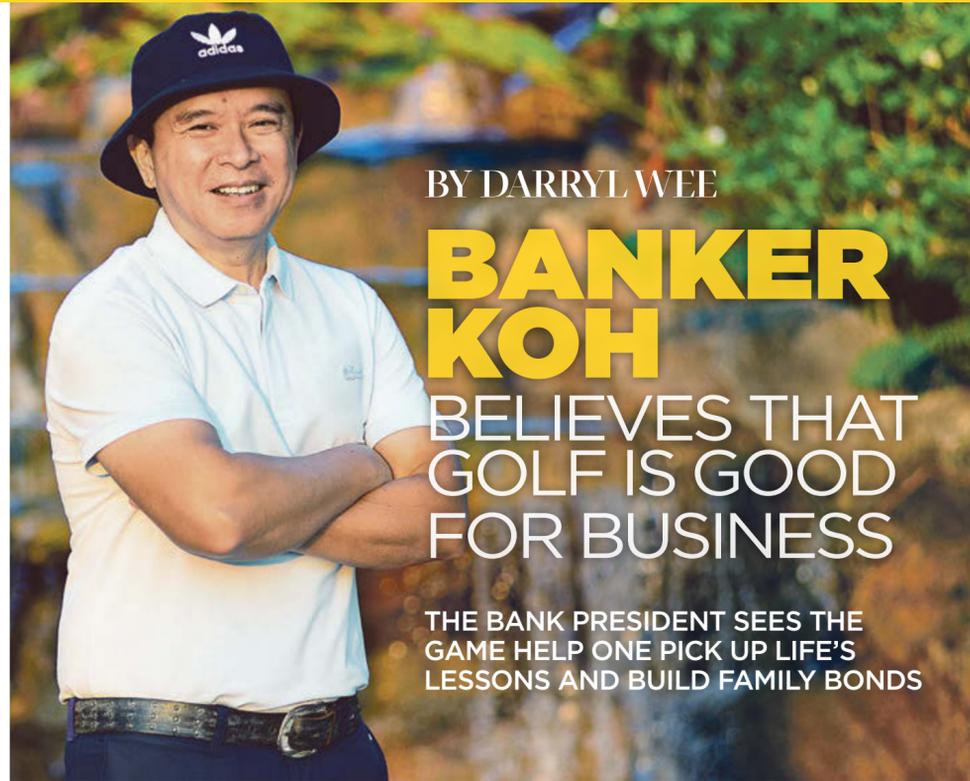
I know of numerous occasions when he offered support and help to people in need.

When you also consider his benevolence to charities, you get the measure of a man whose generosity has seen people being uplifted and organisations finding firm footings.

Swing: How did you get started in golf?

Koh: I recall that in 1980, I happen to watch the US Open final round where Jack Nicklaus beat Isao Aoki to win the title by two shots. It was extremely intense but very exciting, and I became intrigued with the game ever since.

Unlike tennis, where there is only a racquet, golf has 14 different clubs in the bag and the ball is much smaller. It is intriguing



BY DARRYL WEE
BANKER KOH
 BELIEVES THAT
GOLF IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS

THE BANK PRESIDENT SEES THE GAME HELP ONE PICK UP LIFE’S LESSONS AND BUILD FAMILY BONDS

which club to use to play the next shot. That got me hooked. Then, in 1981 when I was in the University of Toronto, I took up golf under a wonderful coach by the name of Bill Whitcombe.

I recall that I started learning during the winter season and many of the lessons had to be done indoors. For the first few sessions, all we did was to learn to hold a seven-iron properly with our left hand, and then to try to hit the ball with the left hand only.

Coach Bill, who had a prosthetic right leg, told me that in golf “if you are right-handed, your left leg is everything. More important than your right.” He was an honest gentleman and I got hooked to the

game because of him.

How has golf been useful in business?

It is not always easy to get someone in business to spend five to six hours with you. In golf, however, you get a chance to do that – from pre-game, to the game itself and post-game food and drinks – all with the intention to really enjoy each other’s company and more importantly to build a rapport.

It also provides an opportunity for you to get to know your business partners, and for them to know you as well. The way they play the game, the way they behave on the course, their punctuality, courtesy, and discipline on the course of

fer a good reflection of their true personality in business as well.

In business, as much as it is about strategy, execution and numbers, it is also very much about the affinity and mutual understanding, trust and respect between business partners. I have had the privilege to have made some lifelong friends and establish some great relationships with business partners being on the golf course over the years.

But clearly if my golf handicap (15.6) today is a reflection of my business capability, I would have made a terrible banker. It is not a case that I can’t count. I count very well (not just for myself but my golf partners as well). It is a case of me

playing bad golf! I have been told I should keep my day job.

Can you provide two or three parallels between the game of golf and business? Please elaborate.

It is true what they say that the game of golf tells a lot about a person’s true character.

As you know, in golf there is a term called mulligan where you can be offered a “do-over” if you hit a bad tee-shot. I believe that a mulligan should not be a request but an offer from your flightmates.

Similarly, in business, any concessions would be better offered than to have to ask. It is equally important for the giver to be gracious and

understanding, and even more magnanimous for the recipient to decline politely. It is truly interesting to see the play of such etiquette on the golf course versus in business.

I have seen both examples and I honestly say I would work harder for my partners who display graciousness on and off the golf course.

It’s a common adage that you learn more about someone on the golf course than in the boardroom. Do you agree and can you give examples?

Yes that is so true. I believe that golf not only tells a lot about someone’s actual character but it is character building as well. I have seen my son learn patience, concentration and resilience as he picked up the game over the years from when he was a young child to now an adult and that is reflective of how he does his business now.

I have seen board members who are able to keep calm during the golf game even under stressful situations while others get nervous when the stakes are high and this is often reflective of how they are in the boardroom as well. There are those who remain calm, honest and consistent in any golf game, whether they are winning or losing. They are the ones I admire the most. They are gentlemen throughout, whether on the course or in the boardroom. They showcase that winning is as important as how you play the game. It’s about walking off the golf course with pride. And that is often reflective of how they are in the boardroom as well.

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

A badly designed golf course! There is a saying that a good golf course makes you want to play so badly that you hardly have time to change your shoes. The opposite can be said of a badly designed golf course. I have played on some golf courses where the greens are shaped like a Pringles potato chip and I



Edmund Koh (left) is off to a good tee-shot.

wonder why? It makes for a miserable game!

There is a difference between a well-designed but challenging course and a badly designed one. The former shows how the course designer and club management understand and care enough to carefully plan each aspect of the game. They make it a truly challenging but fun experience where the challenge is justifiable for all levels of skill of golfers.

Which is your favourite destination and why? Which is your favourite golf courses?

I have had the privilege to play in some of the most amazing golf courses around the world. However my favourite remains Sentosa Golf Club right here in Singapore.

To me, it has two of the most beautifully and cleverly designed courses in the world. The Serapong Course is truly one of the best championship courses in Asia. It is challenging but still very enjoyable. Tanjong is very playable and accommodates all levels of play.

I believe that a great golf club is not defined by just the course but the whole experience.

From the clubhouse to the very well designed course, to the members’ etiquette, the attentive and

knowledgeable staff etc, which all contributes to the lovely weekend golf experience I always experienced at Sentosa. Perhaps it also feels like home and there is pride to have such a well-designed and world recognised golf course right in our backyard.

What was your most memorable or unexpected golfing experience?

My kids were very young when I was golfing quite a fair bit, and whenever I came back from my golf games, my kids would always ask if I won the game. Once, I came back from golf winning the first prize of a hamper in a lucky draw.

I brought back the nice hamper with “First Prize” stuck on the top and my boys were so impressed and jumping up and down congratulating me thinking I won the first prize in the golf tournament. I didn’t have the heart to correct them. However, my daughter, who was seven then, spotted the “Lucky Draw” label on the side of the hamper and she has never let me forget it since!

What would you say to a 20-year-old who tells you golf is four hours of my life wasted?

When you are in your 20’s, the only thing you are likely to want to spend most of your time with is your part-

ner. However, as you get older you realise that golf is one of the sports and quality past time you can ever have to accompany you through life.

Golf has been useful for me from young to now. It has grown and evolved with me as I get older. It is truly a game of life, and best played from young.

There are so many life lessons and skills to be learnt from golf. There are ups and downs, successes and disappointments; elation and frustration, and most importantly how you handle all these emotions on and off the course.

It provides the ultimate challenge and competition often against yourself as you try to always improve your game. It’s you against the golf course and no matter how well you play, you can always do better. The highlight for me is the ability to make friendships on and off the course that often extend beyond golf. I have made some lifelong friendships as a result of golf.

Name your dream foursome and why you pick them.

I love to see families golfing together, especially several generations with the grandfather, father and son playing together.

So my dream team will include my late father. He did not golf but if he did, I

wonder what knowledge and life experiences he would have imparted to me? It would be the best four hours of my life to have the opportunity to walk alongside him on the golf course. I will always remember playing table tennis with him over a makeshift study table.

The second player will be my son. He started playing golf as a young boy and is pretty good and also very competitive. We have friendly wagers all the time and like needling each other. No matter what, we end up talking and sharing a lot together when we are on and off the course making it some of the best private moments I have with him.

My third player will be my wife. We have been married for 38 years. She currently does not play golf. When we were younger, golf was an excuse to spend some “me time” away from my wife and family. Now I wish she will take up golf so we can make it “our time” together.

(Postscript: At time of printing, Mr Koh wanted to reconsider his suggestion for his wife to take up golf as he is concerned there will be no room to house all her new matching golf bags, clubs and wardrobe; instead, Bradley his grandson will be a better third player in time.)



Edmund Koh is pleased with his short chip.

Photos: Tharm Soek Wai

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