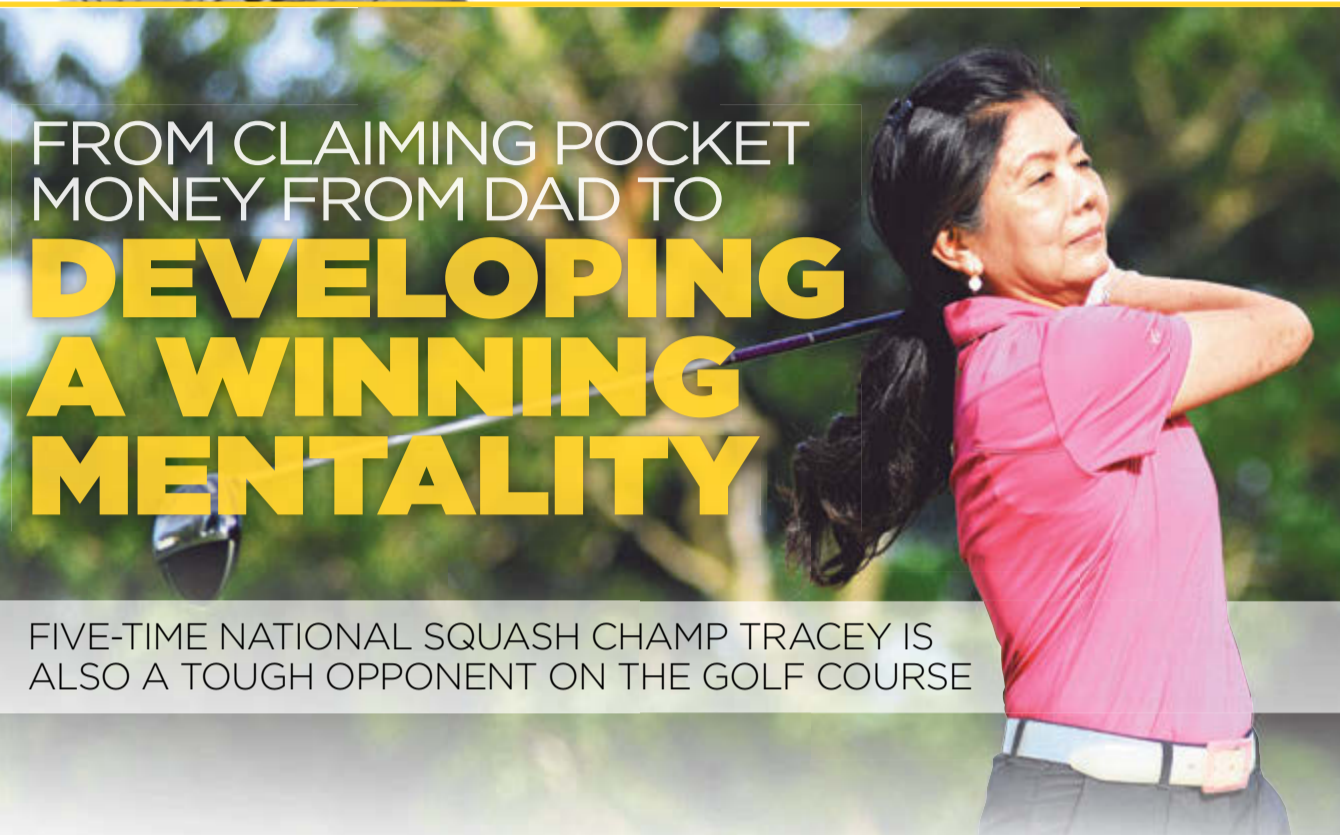




BY GODFREY ROBERT

*Tracey Woon is very passionate about sport, having played netball, softball, volleyball, basketball, tennis, squash and golf. She wanted to be an engineer, was persuaded to study law and eventually became a banker. The now-retired former vice-chairman of Asia-Pacific global wealth management at UBS and director of the National University Health System was a five-time national squash champion who applies the same winning mentality to her longtime pastime, golf.*



## FROM CLAIMING POCKET MONEY FROM DAD TO DEVELOPING A WINNING MENTALITY

FIVE-TIME NATIONAL SQUASH CHAMP TRACEY IS ALSO A TOUGH OPPONENT ON THE GOLF COURSE

### How did you get started in golf, and when?

**Woon:** My father became a member of Singapore Island Country Club in the Sixties and I was introduced to the game as a junior member. I was a real tomboy and although I picked up the game quite quickly, I was always more interested in other ball sports — netball, softball, volleyball, basketball, table tennis, you name it. I only became more regular at golf when I got to pre-university and extra pocket money became more central. You see, my father would often tempt me to wake up at 6am and play nine holes at the Old Course. The carrot was some pocket money if I could beat him. That betting and fighting spirit never left me.

### You were a five-time national squash champion. Tell us about your

### involvement in squash, and which years were you champion?

I took up squash in early 1975 due to a cracked ankle from an ice skating accident which prevented me from playing tennis for many weeks. That was however enough time to get me hooked. I signed up for the Nestle Girls' Under-19 championships three months later and finished third. I then set my sights on the 1976 Ladies Open championship and the rest is history. 1976 to 1980 were busy years for me aside from winning the national title for those five years, there were also many other tournaments, graded championships, leagues and the opportunity to represent Singapore in the East Asian Championships.

Hard as tried for the two years following my last victory, I was runner-up to Lim Seok Hui, a 13-year-old by then. I have always accepted that my reign as national champion would end one day and knew then it was time to retire from competitive squash. I was content

to know that I had given my all in those best years of my game, of my achievement and that it was time to move on.

I have fond memories of my squash years. The hours spent on and off court, torturing my body, learning and training under great coaches, travelling as a team to play for Singapore, playing club nights, competing on the club mixed ladder at the Singapore Cricket Club against men who cannot stand losing to the fairer sex. I also made many friends, including the man who I would eventually marry some nine years later.

### What was your training schedule for squash, especially so because you had a busy working career ahead of you?

My reign in competitive squash spanned over my university and banking days. Throughout my squash career, I played and trained pretty much 365 days a year (exams included). While most were probably out at discos on a Saturday night or mugging

in the library, I was content to hit the little black ball up and down the wall often by myself trying to perfect the shot.

I was a loner in class and didn't belong to any study group. I guess none of my law-mates wanted a free rider in their midst but I was very blessed to have had the benefit of the best notes from the brightest law senior to see me through those four years. Work did not dampen my resolve to train either. Often I would sneak down to the SCC at lunch to play on the mixed ladder, cool down, shower and rush back to work grabbing a bite at my desk.

The real training would then start in the evening after work and dinner is often past nine. Weekends were never spared, it was often a run in the morning, then squash and perhaps a round of golf. So life revolved very much around study (well, not that much) and squash. I often recount jokingly that it was pretty much a time of wasted years chasing a black ball rather than other pur-

suits like dating guys. I have often been teased about my wardrobe: Do I have much else in my cupboard other than short white skirts and frilly panties? Still, if you want to be good at something you just have to work for or at it; there's just no free lunch. In those days physical fitness was much about court drills and endurance. I did not know about weight training. I'm sure I would have been an even more formidable squash player if I did because my golf certainly benefited when I began going to the gym.

### How would you compare golf and squash as sports? Are there any similarities?

In many respects they are very different: A stationary white solid ball versus a speeding black rubber ball, a bag of 14 clubs (though frankly not all are ever used) versus one racket and the list goes on. In fact, it's probably easier to list the similarities. Although it's far more difficult to excel in squash if you were less fit, being fit and

strong can make more difference to the golf game than you would think. Whenever I was in peak form, a pair of strong legs is at the very least a difference between using a nine-iron and eight-iron on an approach shot in golf.

That said, you can only be competitive material in either if you are physically fit: the thing is you need to be fit to play good golf and squash and not play these sports to get fit. Both squash and golf are very mental. There's only you deciding how or will you make that shot or not. One cannot underestimate the focus, desire and will to win, the never-say-die attitude, the resolve and determination to wear out your opponent with your tenacity.

For me walking onto the court in the finals is about wanting to beat your opponent. When the glass door closes, you don't hear or let the sounds outside bother you and the thought of winning the silver doesn't cross the mind because it means losing the gold. There have been many five-setters where I have been on the brink of defeat, being match-point down in the fourth but clawed back to victory.

Although golf played second fiddle until I retired from squash, I nonetheless found time to squeeze in a weekend game, play club medals, mixed foursomes and also represented SICC in the ladies league. Playing weekday client golf was always a bonus. My golf was not quite as good as my squash but I had successes in tournaments and was club intermediate champion one year after a three-way sudden-death play-off on the final day.

I recall in one Open Mixed Shield Competition, I was hit in the eye by a ball from a golfer playing behind me on the 16th hole of the Old Course. He had teed off with his four-iron and although the ball had travelled a good 170 metres before I felt the strike, I still ended up with a swollen black eye for a couple of weeks. At the time, I



The foursome of (from left) Priya Sen, Tracey Woon, Carrie Choy and Liyen Ong affectionately call themselves Gooses.

knew my partner and I were in the lead and that if we kept up our game, we should win.

I had one of the caddies run to the halfway house for ice and finished the rest of the game, clutching the ice pack to my face in between shots. I then happily headed to the hospital for an X-ray knowing that we had won. It's hard to shake the competitive spirit, the desire to win and the "it's not over till it's over" grit holds true for squash and golf and frankly in everything I do.

### You have had a successful career; wanting to be an engineer, studied law and now into banking. Do you find golf as a good business tool, like for networking, interacting and helping in business?

Of course I do. Spending the good part of a day with your clients is without a doubt one of the best ways to interact with them. The kind of relationship and rapport you can build is hard to replicate. It is also as much an opportunity for me to size up my client as for me to achieve my objectives. You see how people react, deal with and perform under pressure or controversy, their risk appetite, their mental resolve, magnanimity and humility (or lack of it).

Conversely golf allows me to exhibit my tenacity, my reliability (because I am someone who doesn't crumble under pressure),

my integrity, my cool and level headedness without ever comprising on my femininity or true self. The last point is important because I hate losing and will go out of my way to win and take his money, client or not. I believe every woman can be at the top of her game (literally) or profession and still be every bit a woman with grace, humility and a good heart.

### How often do you play golf these days? Are you a member of any club? Who do you play with regularly. Any members of your family play the game?

When my children all flew the nest, I went back to playing golf with a vengeance. There was a long time when I thought I would want to be a single-handicapper and play golf everyday when I retired. However other priorities have changed that.

While I still love the game, many other interests have now flooded my life. As a result, I now play more like once a week and still rarely without a wager!

I am a member of SICC but I play all over. I play regularly with a few groups of people (mostly men) but mainly business associates, three secondary schoolmates and a small select group of women. I come from a family of sportsmen so with the exception of my late mother and one sister all of us play.

### Do you follow golf on TV? Do you have a favourite player, if so why?

Not really. I have never been a couch potato and after my desire to become a scratch golfer waned, I watched even less golf on TV. Times I do is to really accompany hubby. That said, I enjoy watching the women's events as I learn so much more from them. The South Korean pro's top my list.

### Given a chance to play with three other members in a flight, who would you choose as flightmates?

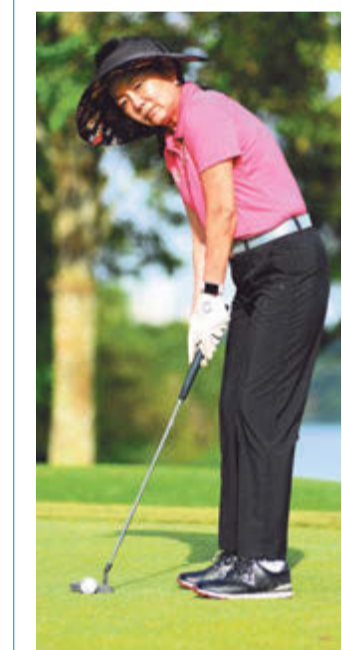
Flight mate No 1 is, without doubt, hubby. Although there was a point in our competitive squash career when we decided to stop playing with each other because it was bad for our relationship and our squash (and yes, he was much better than I), this has never been the case for us where golf is concerned. We rarely ever play a round of golf without a wager. By default it also means we have to partner each other otherwise there would be no bet.

Because we are both so competitive (in everything!), we also understand and know a bad day is never for the lack of trying and focus so we never ever give each other a hard time for screwing up on a hole that matters or missing the crucial putt. We take turns to carry one another as necessary but when we are both

on fire, we relish in taking our opponents to the cleaners. For us therefore, there are only high-fives, "good shot darling" comments and often a peck as well, which disgusts the hell out of our opponents.

The other would be former Senior Minister Prof S Jayakumar. He is someone who NEVER gives up, epitomises the meaning of course management and our battles are fierce and often are down to the last hole. More than his golf, and the fact that he taught me Public Law as a student, he is funny, very dear, a true gentleman, a father figure and someone with a heart of gold.

Another would be top South Korean lady pro Jin-Young Ko. She is so cool, focused and has a swing that I want to emulate. I choose her because the one person I would really like to have as a flightmate is now 98 and unable. I have not played with my father since those teenage pocket money days. I think he would be proud to know his plan worked out well, that he gave me one of the best tools to succeed in life and business and that I turned out to be a pretty decent golfer. I would love the chance to relive those days for I can only remember the joy I felt when money changed hands.



Tracey Woon concentrates on a putt.

Photos: Tham Sook Wai

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