



IN TIME WITH

ROLEX

GOLF TEACHES YOU TO REACT SWIFTLY IN UNPREDICTABLE SITUATIONS AND TO PLAY FAIRLY, SAYS MAYBANK SINGAPORE BOSS

Darryl Wee interviews Datuk R Karunakaran, Chairman of Maybank Singapore Limited.

I first met Datuk Karunakaran at the Singapore Golf Association's hospitality suite during the Singapore Open last January at Sentosa Golf Club.

He stands out because he is tall and cuts an imposing figure. And he is a very friendly person, easily mixing with the guests at lunch there.

Datuk Karu, as he is normally addressed by, gladly accepted my invitation for a friendly golf game. At the game, I noticed that he had a great passion for the game, also possessing a competitive streak.

Not surprisingly, he told me that he watches all the major golf tournaments, either live or on television, and is actively involved in the Maybank Championship, an annual professional golf championship co-sanctioned by the Asian Tour and the European Tour and held in Malaysia.

Here, in a Q and A, Datuk Karu, 69, gives insights on himself and the game of golf.

DW: How did you get started in golf?

DK: I have been a golfer for 40 years now and, interestingly, I started my golfing journey in Singapore. It was in 1979 and I was in my 20s and working for the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA). Back then, I had no intention to play golf because I saw it as "an old man's game". However my cousin, "Captain Bala" who was working in the Singapore Armed Forces,

introduced me to the game, and I played with him and our friends at the Sembawang Country Club.

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

I recently convinced my son to take up the sport based on the fact that this game provides an opportunity for people to connect. Every Chinese New Year we have a tournament that brings the family together, and we have multiple generations playing. I can see value in the game as something that can bring people together.

The beauty of the game is that also at my age, I can play with anybody. Recently, I enjoyed playing with Miguel "Ángel" Jiménez in a Maybank event. I have an interesting story about the Spaniard. We all know he enjoys smoking cigars. However, we discovered that he had a special skill of being able to identify the type of cigars based only on the smell of the smoke. We were all blown away, no pun intended.

How has golf been useful in business?

Golf is a game meant for socialising and networking with friends, family, business associates and clients. During an 18-hole game which takes half-a-day to complete, it provides ample time for you to engage your guests and golf mates more deeply. It is comfortable for business associates to bond over an informal setting.

Can you provide some parallels between the game of golf and business?

There are symbiotic values shared between the game of golf and business, namely maintaining self-discipline

and having integrity. A golfer is always competing with oneself, to improve his or her handicap and score. We have to abide by rules and honour penalties imposed on a bad shot or wrong decision we make.

Have you learned anything from golf that you have applied in business?

There are two lessons I picked up on the golf course that I apply in business.

First, it is about reacting swiftly in an unpredictable situation. Just like the golf game, there are factors within my control, and some others that are beyond my control, such as weather changes. As every golf course is designed differently, one has to think and strategise to navigate the landscape, just like in business. The unchanged mantra to counter unpredictability is to remain composed, determined and keep working on the situation to resolve the issues.

The other invaluable lesson is to demonstrate the discipline to play fairly and perform consistently in golf. This mirrors my philosophy in the business world, where we strive to provide fair terms to our clients and partners, and be steadfast in our delivery.

I applied the same principle of strategising and managing the business situation in golf. I would first scan the environment when I reach a golf course, and plan ahead on how to deal with the course, as well as manage the pace of my play.

Winning the game is akin to profiting in a business. It requires mental strength and physical fitness.

Who was the most interesting business person you have played golf with?

My former boss, then Malaysian International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, at MIDA. She was a keen golfer who played fast and has a dedicated passion for the game.

She showed a high level of integrity whenever she played, which has rubbed off on me. If she made a mistake and incurred an extra stroke, she would accept the penalty with no excuses made.

What was your most memorable or unexpected golfing experience?

It was when I got my first hole-in-one about 10 years ago. I haven't had another since.

Who would be in your dream foursome?

As my experience with Miguel was so positive I would pick him, Tiger Woods and Darren Clarke.

Which is your favourite destination and why?

I don't have a favourite destination. I enjoy travelling to other countries to play with my golf buddies. We do that three or four times a year.

Which is your favourite golf course?

Saujana Golf and Country Club in Malaysia. It is an extremely challenging course.

A BETTER SWING

It's a new Swing from this month.

Honed over four years of changing and tweaking since the idea of a monthly golf publication came into play, the new Swing provides a reinvigorating fresh look.

It's a bigger drive to get more eyeballs.

It's about players and personalities. It's about golf as a sport, and business.

It's about issues and news.

It's bright, brisk and breezy.

In short, the new Swing is a must read. Enjoy!

— Godfrey Robert

photo: Tharm Sook Wai

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