



A DUFF AND A

75

OLYMPIC SWIMMING CHAMP JOSEPH SCHOOLING IS ALSO AT HOME IN GOLF

Joseph Schooling receives a congratulatory fist-bump from the writer.

BY GODFREY ROBERT

HIS five-iron tee shot on the 180-metre first hole of the Singapore Island Country Club's Sime course rolled all along the ground to 120 metres on the left rough.

The celebrated Joseph Schooling, 24, did not blush or feel embarrassed. For he knew that he hadn't played golf for almost a year, so he accepted the duff as par for the course.

Two on and three putts on the difficult sloping green gave him a double-bogey, the worst score in my flight.

The dreadful start came after all the buzz about the swimming sensation who was busy signing autographs and taking photographs only minutes earlier.

Five hours later, Schooling, representing Team BOSS in the Business Times Corporate Golf League last month, did not just finish as the best golfer in my flight (20 strokes better than me, an 18-handicapper) but also joint-best in the field of 120 players.

He shot a three-over 75 gross for 38 points in the System 36 Stableford Points system format, bagging two birdies in the process, both on par-fives after finding the green in two.

Schooling's introduction to golf came a year after his baptism in swim-

ming at the Tanah Merah Country Club. Only six then, the Anglo-Chinese School (Junior) pupil was put under the charge of club coach Kim Baldwin for one-hour weekly lessons sandwiched between his swimming sessions.

Australian Baldwin, 64, who now teaches at Orchid Country Club, says: "I was close to his parents, Colin and May, so I agreed take Joe under my wing. I had been coaching kids for about 15 years then. And I must say that he was among my better proteges.

"He had exceptional talent; was a fast learner with good hand-eye coordination. What I admire Joe most was for his ability to keep calm and composed even when he was upset."

EXTRAORDINARY TALENT

Schooling's extraordinary talent was evident in the way he convinced the Tanah Merah club to change a long-standing rule about playing on its two courses, Garden and Tampines.

When Baldwin heard a senior golf official say that game-ability should count on the issue of proficiency certificates (PCs), he urged the club handicap committee to take Schooling on a test at the Garden course.

Only six and Schooling, after some extra lessons from Baldwin, showed tremendous natural ability during the test. So he earned his PC, forcing the club to change its rule from being mandatory to only those above 12 years to one strictly based on ability.

The PC allowed Schooling to go on rounds with his single-handicap dad as

he was allowed to play nine holes on the two courses.

Subsequently, when he obtained his handicap, he played more often with Colin and his friends, also at the Singapore Island Country Club where his dad is a member, too.

While studying at Bolles School at in Florida and the University of Texas in Austin, Schooling – who counts Rory McIlroy as his favourite golfer – managed many rounds at some of the spectacular courses in the United States.

Standing on the first tee-box at Sime last month, his first question to me was: "Uncle, do you remember our first interview? As a seven-year-old, I was only a kid, a little nervous. But you were very patient and understanding."

In reply, I asked him for some compassion for the game to follow. For, having known about his golfing prowess and especially long drives, I felt that I was going to be intimidated playing with a golfer one third my age.

And in the presence of two other players, both single-handicappers, I was certainly in wrong company for a golf competition.

But no, I really felt at home, with all three, especially Schooling encouraging me. Now I realise how he can be a good role model for his younger swimming teammates. Now I know why he can be a template for expressing tenacity.

When I hit a drive that veered towards water hidden by trees, he was encouraging, immediately uttering "Don't worry, uncle, I saw the ball jump out."

Water, with which Schooling is all too familiar as a world-class swimmer, however, did not feature in Schooling's golf vocabulary. That was because he was precise with his shots and knew his distances.

On the 416-metre par-five sixth hole, he whacked a 250-metre drive. Then, with an exquisite seven-iron shot, he found the green from almost 170 metres. Two putts from 20 feet and a birdie was in his bag.

Observing Schooling for five hours on a hot day, I gleaned that he was a go-getter who does not shy away from a challenge. There were times when he defied predictability by taking courageous shots, and profiting. Then there were also occasions when he allowed his mind to rule.

His mannerisms were impeccable, always smiling, often encouraging, and enjoying banter. He "uncled" me so very often that I flashed back in my mind that very first meeting with him at Tanah Merah in 2002.

He laughed gleefully at jokes. And he guffawed when I told him that I was an Olympic gold medallist by default, the skipper of the Indian team that won gold in Moscow 1980 played under my hockey captaincy at college 13 years prior.

Vasudevan Baskaran has more than Olympic gold to share with Schooling. They are true-blue champions who exuded warmth, applied intensity at training and competition, and displayed sagacity garnered from high-level competition.

photo by Tharm Sook Wai