

Tan Kuan Ern
SICC Member



REMEMBERING OUR HERITAGE, IMAGINING OUR FUTURE

SICC Member Tan Kuan Ern meets 51-year Member, Gordon Seow Li-Ming

Gordon Seow Li-Ming's first experience with what is now The Singapore Island Country Club ("SICC" or the "Club") was on a certain day in 1937 when he was just five years of age. At the time, he was living at 117 Emerald Hill Road, which was one of only two compound houses on Emerald Hill, which boasted a tennis court; incidentally, the other belonged to S.J. Chan, Island Club's first President, who lived next door. That day in 1937, Gordon and his aunt Rosie left their residence in the late afternoon to make their way up Thomson Road to fetch his grandfather, Seow Poh Leng, the former General Manager of the Ho Hong Bank, at the Island Club, following his game of golf. He remembers well this very first visit that would be the start of a multi-decade relationship for Gordon, now 79, with the Club.

Gordon would eventually join what became the Royal Island Club ("RIC") on 5 March 1960, and remains today one of a small handful of members who can count 50 years of continuous membership with the Club. His long relationship with the Club makes him one of the keenest observers of our history and heritage. The Club has gone through much change over the past few decades, and Gordon notes that it would do us well to acknowledge "from whence we came", so that we can better chart our future.

The establishment of the SICC in 1963, following the merger of RIC and the Royal Singapore Golf Club ("RSGC"), created a whole new club blending two separate cultures. The period of membership transferability starting from 1992 accelerated this change. And in the past decade, we have borne witness to tremendous physical changes as well, with the opening of the Island Swimming Complex and the hubbub of construction that will soon deliver the new Island Clubhouse.

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Tennis party at Oberon
Gordon seated front row on the extreme left; Seow Poh Leng standing extreme right with tennis racquet circa 1935

While transformation at the Club has been a recurrent theme, certain fundamental elements in Gordon's view should always remain for a Club such as ours – the focus on the game of golf, and all the things it stands for, namely: honour, honesty, self-reliance and etiquette. In this, he holds true to The Keepers' Mission, the gravitating mission statement from the organisation entrusted to preserve the values of golf. This statement is a testament to the ethos of golf, where in particular it states, "The essence of golf must not be lost in a world where change outpaces perspective and winning is more important than honour," and recognising that, "... golf has long been associated with honesty, good manners, and high standards of behaviour. Golf should cherish that reputation and do all it can to keep it." For Gordon, staying true to these tenets is not only an aspiration he believes we should embody, but a way of life we should honour and follow.

Remembering the Club of Yesteryear

Gordon returned to Singapore in 1958, following an extended period of time in Australia during World War II, then in Penang, and subsequently followed by England where he completed his education. He joined Shell where he would spend 30 years of his working life, following which he was Singapore's Commissioner to Hong Kong from 1988 to 1994.

His motivation to join the Club in 1960 was a simple "liking of what I saw, namely the facilities, the members, the ambience." He felt comfortable and wanted to be part of it and at the time, apart from Keppel Club, it was the only other golf club he could join.

He remembers that in those days, initiation or entrance fees were a princely S\$250 and monthly dues were S\$50. Applicants for membership required Sponsors, a Proposer and a Seconder who would "vouch for the bona fides of the candidate for membership and introduce him/her to the General Committee ("GC"), who would by secret ballot cast their vote, either with a white ball ('Yes') or a black ball ('No'). The GC's decision needed to be unanimous. A single black ball in the ballot would disqualify an applicant automatically. Gordon only became aware of the secret ballot after he joined the GC in 1967.

He notes that in the early sixties, there were no time sheets or internet booking for tee-times. One just turned up at the 1st or 10th tee and placed one's ball in a 'chute' and the ball at the bottom of the 'chute' determined priority on the tee. Guests were always welcome and were not subjected to green fees.

Gordon's favourite course was the original layout of the New Course (a walking course). Since then however, he has grown



Seow Poh Leng with grandchildren Valentine, Gordon, Kian & Lillian, on the tennis court at his house Oberon, 117 Emerald Hill Road circa 1934

to prefer Bukit to the other courses. He carried a handicap of 2 in his prime, which saw him representing the Republic four times in 1968, 1975, 1976 and 1977, in the South East Asia Amateur Golf Team Championships (Putra Cup) and once in 1975 in the Asian Amateur Golf Team Championships.

Gordon notes in the early years, changing rooms did not have lockers. Instead, there were benches and racks with hooks and coat hangers. While RIC had showers, the RSGC had basins of water and buckets to scoop the water and douse oneself. Boston Bags had not yet been invented and members made do with woven rattan garment bags. He noted that members would remove their watches, wallets and car keys and place them on top of their garment bags before heading to the bathing cubicles, in "full confidence that their belongings would be safe and sound and just as they left them." The sense of trust, he notes, was high.

Decorum of the day saw members' conversations in the changing rooms conducted in subdued tones. He notes that this was nothing like today when conversations at one end of the locker room can be heard at the other end and frequently punctuated with profanity. He also pointed out that he never used to see any male person wear a hat inside the clubhouse.

Gordon also recalls the F&B practices of the day. When hailing a waiter for service at the RIC, members would cry "Ah-Koh" and at the RSGC, the cry was "Boy". A waiter would quickly arrive and he notes that most waiters could "take up to 10 orders at a time without writing them down, and subsequently be able to place each order in front of the person who ordered it!" He also notes that the Club back then already found it difficult to break even on F&B. Menus were simple but wholesome, with nothing fancy served.



Putra Cup Team 1968, KL

From left to right: Brian Marks, Phua Tian Kay, Dennis Lee, Lau Yang Choon, Gordon Seow and David Milne

*"Rather we need members to focus on their common interests again
– that we should aspire to be the best country club in Singapore.
Start with that and refine from there."*

Malayanisation, increasing membership rolls and a changing SICC

Gordon notes that the Club started to become more diverse during the mid-sixties when Malayanisation started to gain momentum, with locals replacing expatriates in the workplace and taking up club memberships.

Around that time, Cheong Thiam Siew's efforts to interest his friends, comprising primarily Hokkien and Teochew businessmen with offices located in Telok Ayer Street, to join the Club proved successful and saw their numbers grow. This leads to them being affectionately referred to as the Telok Ayer Street golfers. Included in this group was also one Chidambaran, popularly called 'Chid', who was a Chettiar (Chetty) and a licensed money lender.

At the time, Gordon also notes that the Club Managers were drawn from the ranks of retired professional managers, and he recalled the likes of James Smellie and A.M. Cherian (both ex-Shell), Norman Sutcliffe (ex-Telecoms), Tom Jukes (ex-Army), Edmund Wong (ex-Dunlops) and Dieu Siew Chuan (ex-Civil service) as having contributed beneficially to the development and management of the Club, particularly as the membership rolls increased. In those days, clubs in Singapore did not really need, nor had, the resources to operate fully staffed teams of professional management. This, Gordon notes, compares with today's fully staffed organisation with a General Manager and a management team of 10 Head of Departments, plus a supervisory General Committee aided by 17 Sub-committees with a compliment of some 90 sub-committee members.

The gradual increase of membership would continue over the next few decades and accelerated, in particular, post 1992 when the membership became transferrable. Today, the club counts some 7,789 principal members, 5,831 spouse members and 4,768 junior members.

Gordon laments that the SICC of today has lost some of its traditions, customs and congeniality. Remembering the easy chatter from the past, he laments the many times he would out of habit say "Hi", or "Good morning" when he passed someone coming from the opposite direction, only to be stared at in return with the 'why are you talking to me?' expression.



Similarly, he is saddened by the growing lack of respect by some for the game of golf, its rules, the courses, fellow players, their Club and in some cases, themselves, when they do not respect simple things like the dress code. There is pride in his eyes when he talks about the game of golf. He calls it, "an ancient and honourable game and while we had nothing to do with making it ancient, we can at least try to keep it honourable."

He remembers well the advice drummed into him by his father, Seow Sieu Jin, who told him, "Always be conscious of the flight behind you, and if they should be waiting, pick up your pace of play or pick up your ball and move on." He notes that today's attitude is one of "let them wait!"

Gordon, who carried his own bag till he was 65, re-affirms that, "We all owe the game respectability. One has to behave well and lead by example." He feels strongly that we need to teach this to our up-and-coming players at the Club so that they, too, will become role models to those younger than themselves.

Playing his part to maintain the Keepers' Mission

Those of us who have attended AGMs and EGMs will know Gordon for his staunch upholding of the rules, traditions and decorum in all he speaks about and pursues with the GC and management of the day. What is his motivation? An unwavering belief that we must not let go of the values of our past. As he said himself, "Without the past, what are we today?" His multiple emails and points made during meetings are all motivated to bring back decorum, class, tradition and a value system to the Club. "The Club should be a place where members treat one another with honour and respect."

He notes that the qualities that made the Club great have not changed. Specifically, "the choice land, choice locations, the most beautiful traditional-style golf courses, using the natural contours of the land with minimum earth moving. In many ways, we have the original natural topography in place as nature planned it." From his viewpoint, the Club needs to recognise and preserve that which it inherited from its two illustrious parents; no other Club in Singapore has such a rich history. He notes that, "Money cannot buy it so let's not waste it. It's part of who we are and how we got here; the importance of 'from whence we came'" He notes that where we are headed and how we are going to get there is now for those delegated and entrusted with the power to decide and plan the Club's future.

He wants us to remember, however, the hard earned unity of the 1960s, which was driven by members for members, and recalls gentlemen like Cheong Thiam Siew, and particularly Cheong Wing, the proprietor of the Leung Wah Medical Hall. Cheong Wing was otherwise known as "Mr High-C" or "Allright-Allright." Why was this so? Because he marketed a brand of vitamin-C supplements called "High-C" and would generously distribute this among members. And why "Allright-Allright?" Because he was doubly generous in conceding long putts with his trade-mark expression, "Allright-Allright!"

Cheong Wing was Chinese educated and did not speak English well but he nevertheless became a GC member, Vice-Captain and Vice-President of the Club, and not least, was the spokesperson for the Telok Ayer Street golfers. He engaged a personal assistant well versed in English to explain the minutes of meetings to him and he attended meetings showing an uncanny understanding of the issues and even corrected mistakes in the minutes, which earned himself the respect and admiration of his fellow GC members. He became and was well known as the most popular President of the Singapore Senior Golfers Society due to his tireless efforts and overwhelming generosity in distributing green and yellow

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Seow Poh Leng, dapper dresser and accomplished golfer, at Cameron Highlands circa 1936

umbrellas with the Hi-C logo at major golfing events. Gordon notes that the efforts made by individuals such as Cheong Wing played an important role in bringing an increasingly diverse Club closer together.

Remembering our heritage, imagining our future

"What are you without history? If we know not from whence we came....," Gordon mulls, as we approach the end of our discussion. I asked him what is the thing that he most cherishes about the Club, having had the opportunity to see so much of it over the past 50 years. He thought for a while and said, "It is the rich heritage that the RIC and RSGC bequeathed to the SICC which would include culture, traditions, customs and values". He went on to say, "And what I enjoy are the pleasant memories as the Clubs were then..., its members, staff, their attitudes and their manners and behaviour."

To underscore his point, Gordon went on to tell me that the celebrated golf course architect and designer, Tom Fazio, who designed Caves Valley Golf Club at Owings Mills Maryland, a private member-owned and managed, not-for-profit corporation, was once asked "What is it that makes a golf club great?" His reply: "Its traditions and its members!"

Gordon wants us, as part of the now 7,789 strong principal memberships of the SICC, to understand our past, so that we might better imagine the future we want, and work in unison towards achieving those goals. He notes that the Club's last book, *The Eagle and the Lion*, should be a must-read by all new members (and staff) to gain a sense of from whence we came. He also notes that the heritage articles and the future heritage room at the New Island Clubhouse, will all be important repositories for members to understand our past.

With history as his foundation, Gordon's fervent wish for the future of SICC is that the Club will earn the reputation and be regarded as: A Club of courteous, cultured and disciplined members, managed by dedicated and committed professionals, and directed by a dynamic and enlightened General Committee.

Specifically to the GC, he notes that they are: "The trustees and custodians of the Club's history, traditions, customs, values, rules & bye-laws, and bound by a fiduciary duty to act in the best interests of the Club and its members."

Of the ups and downs of the Club in the past decade, he notes "we can't go back and try to change the recent past; that would be more difficult than trying to push toothpaste back into the tube." "Rather we need members to focus on their common interests again – that we should aspire to be the best country club in Singapore. Start with that and refine from there." He notes that we have a unique group of younger members with the capabilities to ensure the right future for the Club.

As we were ending our discussion, he looks at the Club's emblem pasted in symmetry on the glass panel behind where we sat. He notes that the Eagle represented the RIC and the Lion represented the RSGC. The belt bonding around both emblems symbolised the coming together of the two former clubs to create the new SICC in 1963. To Gordon, our Club Emblem is symbolic and sacrosanct; it is a reflection of our distinguished heritage, a visual emblem of us as a membership body and an historic foundation from which we can chart our future. As members today, as we pursue the future together we could do well to heed Gordon's tacit message that the belt that united us then should continue to unite us now.