

The King and I

Brad Ewart thought he knew all about golf's bizarre side, but that was before he played with the Sultan of Johore

By Brad Ewart
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JOHORE BAHRU, Malaysia — The Sultan Mahmood Iskandar of Johore, the former King of Malaysia, is the undisputed "King of Golf."

His Majesty plays by the King's Rules and what he says goes.

He's perhaps the only member of royalty in the world who plays 36 holes of golf or more in one day.

"That's because they (other kings) probably have more work to do," he said.

The sultan's not the only one who owns his own golf course, but there's probably not another golfer in royalty who could beat His Majesty.

His Majesty always uses the Royal golf cart and plays 18 holes in just over two hours. A ghetto blaster plays a local rock-and-roll station throughout the round. "It helps keep me loose and I like the music." To check the direction of the wind the sultan uses a can of white spray powder, and he has an aide to tee up his ball.

The Royal color is yellow and he only uses a yellow ball. His enormous golf bag, bearing the Royal crest, carries 20 clubs.

"I have many sets of clubs," says the sultan. "I don't know how many sets. I'm very particular about the clubs I use and if I don't like them I'll get another set."

He carries three drivers with varying degrees of loft and different shafts. His set also includes a four, five and six wood. He

has his own repair shop in the palace. The sultan has been known to stop part way through a round to go back to the palace to change a grip on his club.

"I play golf because I like to be physically fit. Golfing helps me burn off a few calories and keeps my cholesterol level down. Golf also gets me away from the palace and out in the clean fresh air," says the 57-year-old.

The sultan's attendants keep a record of every round he has played. In 1987 he played 9,725 holes — slightly more than 534 rounds. One day he zipped around in the Royal cart for 63 holes.

There's more to the sultan than his life as a golfer. He is a certified pilot and has his own helicopter with a landing pad at the palace and another near the 18th green at the Royal Johore G.C. The sultan also collects cars, but doesn't know how many he has. In his palace garage there are Mercedes Benz, Porsches, Mustangs, BMW's and a Ferrari.

Another one of his passions is large motorcycles. His collection includes a "Fat Bob" Harley Davidson that he rides anywhere he wants. His motorcycle habits drive the Royal bodyguards crazy. One day, along with 15 mounted bodyguards, the sultan decided to ride to Kuala Lumpur, 250 miles distant.

It was a privilege and a most memorable experience to meet and play golf with the sultan. After missing the cut in the Singapore Open I had the good fortune to meet

the sultan's sister, Tunku Tun Maimunah Ismail, who arranged the game for me.

My instructions were to be at the course at 3 p.m. His Majesty was interested in the fact I was a golf professional and a journalist from Canada and a trick shot artist as well. He wanted to know what my tricks were all about, thought he might get a few tips and consented to an interview.

We talked briefly and then the sultan said, "I'll warm up and we'll see you on the first tee." On the way to the tee I was briefed by one of the sultan's attendants on what the Royal golfing protocol would be.

"His Majesty always tees off first. And when he is hitting a shot always stand attention to the right of him. Never stand behind and don't talk before or while he is hitting. And when His Majesty's ball is on the green you must say, that putt is good, sir. (It's a gimme!) And please Mr. Brad, only if he asks for advice then give him golf instruction."

Now that I knew the sultan's rules I was ready for an experience of a lifetime.

The sign on the first tee said: "No three balls or four balls on weekends or holidays." To speed up play golfers could only play in twosomes. It was a Sunday and we played a ravenous.

Remember, it's the King's Rules.

Accompanying the sultan and I was the head of the Royal Police Force, the top helicopter pilot in the King's Air Force and His Majesty's right-hand man. We also had five caddies and three armed motorcycle riders. I rode with the sultan in the golf cart while our playing partners rode on the back of the motorcycles.

The sultan topped his shot off the first tee. Immediately the three golfers we played with and the caddies all took off down the fairway to retrieve the ball. That was what you call a Royal Mulligan. His Majesty hit again and then we all teed off.

When the sultan's ball reached the green we all gave him the putt. Even though the 30-foot putt was "good" the sultan always likes to putt anyway. With one hand on the putter and the other clutching his cigarette the sultan putted six balls before one finally found the cup. "Nice par Your Majesty."

Remember, it's the King's Rules. After the game I performed a trick shot exhibition for the Royal Family and members of the Royal Johore G.C. to conclude a day I'll always remember.

■ Iskander is one of nine hereditary rulers, or sultans, of the states making up Malaysia. Every five years these nine men elect one of their number to be king, a position Iskander held from 1984 to 1989.

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