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HENDRIK VERWOERD-TOEKENNING

GARY J. PLAYER

COMMENDATIO DEUR
PROF. H.B. THOM, VOORSITTER, HENDRIK VERWOERD-TRUST
(PRETORIA, 4 NOVEMBER 1978, 20h00)

Gary Player - die suksesvolste gholfspeler wat Suid-Afrika nog opgelewer het, een van die suksesvolste wat die wêreld geken het!

'n Oorsig van sy sportprestasies sou baie tyd in beslag neem; en omdat die lys so lank sou word, sal die herhaling van suksesse in eentonigheid verval, miskien sóseer dat 'n prestasie wat vir 'n speler van mindere gehalte groot lof sou meebring, in die geval van Gary Player maar net nog 'n sukses sou wees wat amper nie meer raakgesien word nie. Sy suksesse was só talryk, die gehalte só hoog, dat by 'n evaluering hy amper as sy eie norm geneem moet word.

Ofskoon ons nie 'n lys van sy suksesse wil maak nie, stip ons - net om 'n aanduiding te gee - 'n paar aan. In Johannesburg, sy geboorteplek, toon hy as tienderjarige al besondere belang=stelling en aanleg vir sy spel; en in sy twintiger jare verwerf hy reeds groot roem met oorwinnings en pryse wat hy in buitelandse toernooie inoes. Daarmee het 'n nuwe man in die gholfwêreld verskyn, wat weldra op die lippe van almal sou wees en gretiglik deur organiseerders van groot toernooie gesoek sou word.

Gary Player het in sy sport die veeleisendste kampioenskappe en die grootste pryse verower, in ons eie land en in lande ver van ons af: die Suid-Afrikaanse kampioenskap, die Australiese

kampioenskap, die Britse Ope, die Amerikaanse Ope, die Ameri=
kaanse Meesters, die P.G.A., die Picadilly-putjiespeltitel,
die Kanada-beker en nog baie ander. Dié prestasies het hy
in konkurrensie met die bestes van die wêreld gelewer; en
wat dit nog des te merkwaardiger maak, is dat hy verskeie van
hierdie titels 'n hele aantal kere gewen het. Hy kan nou, op
drie-en-veertigjarige leeftyd, op 'n professionele sportloopbaan
terugkyk wat slegs enkeles in die wêreld kan ewenaar. Ons
wens hom van harte geluk; hy het - in en buite Suid-Afrika -
sy sport op uitnemende wyse gedien.

Luisterryk soos hierdie prestasies is, is dit as sodanig nog nie
die rede waarom die Hendrik Verwoerd-Toekenning aan hom gegee
word nie. Daar is dinge wat groter is as sportprestasies -
selfs groter as dié van Gary Player - en dit is veral omrede
van hierdie dinge dat hy vereer word.

'n Mens sou 'n hele reeks van voortreflike karaktertrekke kon
noem wat eie aan hom is. Ek volstaan met enkele.

Ofskoon hy geesdriftige sportman is, en van gesellige, prettige
geselskap hou, is hy ook man van lewenserns. Hy maak geen
geheim van die rol wat die Christelike godsdiens in sy lewe speel
nie; trouens, hy het al selfs op die sportvelde van die wêreld -
en te midde van ongeërgde, onverskillige mense - met openhartig=
heid hiervan getuig.

Hy is ook deur en deur gesinsman, met intense liefde vir sy egge=
note, sy kinders en sy huis. Ons weet dat hy op sy gelukkigste
is wanneer hy hom in die intieme kring van sy huismense bevind;

wanneer hy aan sy kinders iets van sy geliefde spel kan vertel; wanneer hy buite in die veld en sonskyn saam met hulle kan werskaf; en wanneer hy saam met sy eggenote, in allerhande klein dingetjies vir hulle rigting in die lewe kan gee. 'n Mens kan verstaan dat die gedwonge, herhaalde tydperke van afwesigheid van huis, vir hom telkens groot opoffering beteken; maar ons weet ook dat sy huis, al is dit soms oor groot afstand, vir hom 'n bron van inspirasie bly.

Hieruit volg amper vanself dat hy ook in die jeug in die algemeen egte belangstelling sal hê. Hy is 'n gelukkige man wanneer hy 'n klomp jong kinders - blank of nie-blank - op sy plaas bymekaar het en sonder inhibisie lustig met hulle saam verkeer, altyd besig om met iets opbouends die voortou te neem. Ek het altyd gedink: Gary Player sal die ideale onderwyser gewees het; miskien selfs 'n beter onderwyser as gholfspeler!

Dan is daar die karaktertrek wat hy reeds sedert sy vroeë jeugjare op treffende wyse openbaar, miskien sy vernaamste karaktertrek: sy egte, ongekunstelde nederigheid. Waar hy ook al is - in internasionale toernooie van die wêreld; of op die platteland van Transvaal en Kaapland; of in die geselskap van invloedryke staatsmanne; of van sy joggie op die setperk en die skoonveld - oral is hy dieselfde nederige mens.

We now come to the crux of the matter. Gary Player's name has for many people become synonymous with that of South Africa. He has taken part in a large number of tournaments in a variety of lands; he always went as a South African, and he was proud of the fact. While some South Africans hide their citizenship

and try to gain entry overseas by means of foreign passports, Gary Player is quite candid about his country of origin; and foreign countries were glad to have him.

He has, in fact, advertised his nationality - not in the sense that he showed off and in the process made a nuisance of himself, but in sense that he has been an advertisement for South Africa. He has in his own person been unmistakable evidence of quality from South Africa, quality in the field of sport, quality of body and mind, and quality of character.

He has become a splendid ambassador for South Africa; and in this rôle he has been strikingly active for quite a number of years. He has not been asked or appointed by anyone, he receives no payment, and he has not been given any promises. When he proceeds overseas he goes in all honesty simply as a sportsman; and to him it is the normal, natural thing to go as a South African. When he harvests one brilliant success after another, his service to South Africa grows in direct proportion. This is the type of ambassador countries at the present day need very badly, especially a country like South Africa, which has to cope with prejudice, misrepresentation and a good deal of civilised hypocrisy, and which is engaged in a desperate fight to free itself from the stranglehold of stagnating isolation.

Little wonder that Gary Player has become a household name in South Africa, and the hero of South Africa's youth. In him our young people find that indefinable, inspiring quality which makes one's work worthwhile, which helps you to scale the steep gradients, which makes you proud of your country, and which makes

you love your own people, whether white or brown or black. A few weeks ago a friend told me the interesting story of a group of young boys who had decided to start a Gary Player Club; he will not even know about them, but they know why they want to have this club.

We have noted the three elements in Gary Player's life: his sport and sporting achievements, his qualities as a human being, his ambassadorship for South Africa. It was mainly as a result of his sterling ambassadorship for our country that the Trustees of the Hendrik Verwoerd Trust felt the need - and also decided unanimously - to grant him their award. But the three elements remain inseparable: without his golf he would not have been Gary Player, and the same applies in the case of his character and his significance for South Africa. The three elements constitute a whole; mutually and cumulatively they add up to the individual we honour, the complete South African sportsman.

With the Hendrik Verwoerd Award we place him in the company of Dr. M.S. Louw, the late Dr. Verwoerd, Dr. Chris Barnard, Dr. A.J.A. Roux and Dr. W.L. Grant, and our State President, Mr. B.J. Vorster. This is illustrious company which adds lustre to his own name; but we know that he will be worthy of this company and in turn make his own splendid contribution.

We wish to add a few words of very special appreciation of the fact that we are privileged to have Mrs. Player with us. We thank her for the way in which she discharges her duty as a loyal ally by the side of her husband; and for the way she fills the breach

during the numerous periods of his absence. We are grateful to know that she, with her children, is to him a real inspira=tion.

Gary Jim Player, u het op uitnemende wyse voldoen aan die ver=eiste wat vir 'n ontvanger van die Hendrik Verwoerd-Toekenning gestel word, t.w. dat hy buitengewone diens van nasionale betekenis vir Suid-Afrika moet gelewer het. Namens die Trustees, en ooreenkomstig die Akte van die Trust, oorhandig ek hiermee aan u die Hendrik Verwoerd-Toekenning. Ek wens u van harte geluk; mag sukses en vreugde u vergesel op die pad vorentoe.

(get.) H.B. THOM