Can this midfielder play striker in politics?

Senior Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs Ho Peng Kee plays midfield in recreational football, eschewing the high-profile striker’s role. He tells Li Xueying, there’s value in pulling the game together, not just scoring goals.
LEG'S dance. Sweat trickles. And a beleaguered football flies into a goalpost.

It's Sunday morning and some Yishun residents are playing a raucous game of street soccer opposite Block 244's four-room flats and Yishun Combined Temple.

In the fray is a short, silver-haired man, togged out in full football regalia - red jersey, matching shorts, blue knee-length socks and soccer boots.

When the whistle blows, Associate Professor Ho Peng Kee exists, leaping over the waist-high panel around the concrete court.

Breathing hard, the 51-year-old says, when asked about his playing style: "I'm earnest and aggressive. I play to win. I'm not an extremely good player but I like to be in the thick of things."

The Football Association of Singapore president has played the game competitively since school days at Anglo-Chinese School, then National Junior College and the National University of Singapore.

He routinely takes the role of midfielder, a position, he says, that allows him to "shape the play that is developing."

Why not be a striker - much more glamorous and at the forefront of the action?

Yes, he acknowledges, "the newspapers highlight the strikers who get the goals."

But being a midfielder isn't too bad either.

"A midfielder facilitates. We help shape the game, pull things, pull people together."

Clearly, the junior minister is well aware of the double entendre in the questions.

Asked if he's up to being a striker on the national political stage, the Nee Soon East MP says promptly: "I'll do whatever's given to me, to the best of my ability."

A law lecturer who entered politics in 1991, Prof Ho left academia two years later to serve as Parliamentary Secretary for Law and Home Affairs.

In the last 12 years, he's hovered in that nebulous political space between a backbencher and a full Cabinet minister. His last promotion was four years ago, when he became Senior Minister of State for both ministries.

Since then, a younger crop of politicians, who entered politics after he did, have become full ministers.

Prof Ho himself was also considered ministerial material.

During the 2001 General Election, then-prime minister Goh Chok Tong said he was prepared to appoint Prof Ho to a full ministerial position after the election. The latter's electoral campaign then was dogged by a high-profile temple tempest, when temple representatives claimed they were pressured into donating to community grassroots funds.

Reminded of Mr Goh's words, a startled Prof Ho explains that Mr Goh prefaces his remarks by saying that there were few lawyers in Cabinet: "There's Professor S. Jayakumar, there's Ho Peng Kee, who are lawyers. So if looking for a Law Minister, factually he must be one of them who can be considered."

As to whether he's disappointed that he hasn't been elevated to full minister, Prof Ho says candidly, with a nod towards the People's Action Party culture that squashes obvious political ambitions: "In Singapore politics, these are topics we don't talk about."

"To me, it's just, if it comes it comes; if it doesn't come, as long as you enjoy what you're doing and you think you are contributing, you continue. Right?"

"If not, you move on..."

Despite being the No. 2 at the two ministries that craft and implement this country's tough laws dealing with law-breakers from drug traffickers to road speedsters, Prof Ho in person is Mr Nice Guy personified.

A scheduled 1 ½-hour interview stretches to nearly 2 ½ hours. He sings The Nee Soon East Song at your request, and passes amusing anecdotes, often at his own expense.

About his passion for Mandarin and Cantonese opera, the chairman of Kreta Ayer People's Theatre says:

"These operas are very long, but some of the values they convey are quite useful."

"Like loyalty to the nation, filial piety, being long-suffering."

To laughter from the room, he goes on to add wryly: "I must be right because otherwise, like you said, some people wonder, 'You know you are not full minister, all these years why are you still there?'"

"In the meantime, he is paying scant attention to such talk."

On the national stage, Prof Ho is busy with work ranging from the much-awaited review of the Penal Code, including the sections on sex offences. He also heads a committee that wants to broaden alternative sentencing options "to variegate our punishment system so that it's not just go to jail or fine."

Back in his own constituency, he is in regular meetings with officials from Alexandra Hospital on its move to Yishun Central, fulfilling an election promise he made in 2001.

It is scheduled to be completed by 2009, but "I will work with the hospital and see whether we can bring it about earlier, maybe 2008."

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