



30 Years of the GREAT SINGAPORE WORKOUT

*Get out of your seat
On to your feet
Get your body moving like mine
It's Singapore, Singapore
Workout Time*

And with those words, the Great Singapore Workout was officially launched on 3 October 1993. On that day, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, dressed in a pink T-shirt and crisp white shorts – together with some 26,000 similarly clad individuals – took to the Padang to do a dance workout in a bid to get Singaporeans to exercise and keep fit. Goh told reporters that he had enjoyed the session. “It is a good exercise,” he said. “I recommend this to everybody.” Goh had undergone two training sessions and then practised on his own a few times before his public debut.¹

Why a National Workout?

The workout was first unveiled on 1 September 1993 as the highlight of the second National Healthy Lifestyle Campaign.² The Healthy Lifestyle Committee headed by Kwa Soon Bee, the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Health, was the brainchild behind the workout. The committee hoped to “popularise

Launched in 1993, the Great Singapore Workout helped spread the message that being physically active was important.
By Lim Tin Seng

the Great Singapore Workout as a Singapore exercise which everyone can do in the schools, homes and workplaces even after the campaign”.³ “It is a simple exercise routine which Singaporeans of all ages could learn and enjoy,” said Kwa.

The 1992 National Health Survey had revealed that only 13.6 percent of Singaporeans aged 18 to 69 were actively engaging in regular exercise of light or moderate intensity.⁴ This was a worrying statistic for the Health Ministry. “This is a matter for concern as physical inactivity is an important risk factor that predisposes an individual to lifestyle-related diseases such as high-blood pressure, heart disease and strokes,” said Kwa.⁵

Creating a “Fun” Workout

Designed by the Singapore Fitness Instructors’ Association and the Singapore Sports Council, the Great Singapore Workout was a carefully choreographed low-impact aerobic routine that was aimed at anyone between the ages of seven and 70.

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(Facing Page) Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong doing the Great Singapore Workout with participants at the Padang during the launch of the 1995 National Healthy Lifestyle Campaign. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The workout had five main stages – a warm-up session, upper body movements, lower body movements, total body exercises and cooling down. The 15-minute low-impact workout comprises the basic march; the side-step with scissor and arm bends; the toe tap and stretch; the arm and heel press; and the punch and kick movement.⁶

Created with safety in mind, the workout forgoes the high-impact leaps and bounds of aerobics, ensuring that one foot remains firmly on the ground at all times. A health advisory was also issued to people over 35; those who did not exercise regularly; had medical problems such as heart disease, asthma or fits; or were severely overweight to consult their doctors before proceeding with the workout.⁷

“The exercises have to be safe, effective and suitable for all age groups from children to grandmothers,” said Bronwyn Dearnley, one of the three fitness instructors who choreographed the routine. “They can’t be too strenuous and have to be fun to encourage people to start exercising.”⁸

Although the workout could reportedly burn up to between 80 and 100 calories, it was meant to be seen as more than just a calorie-burning routine. “The Workout aims to get Singaporeans to exercise and have fun together. It encourages Singaporeans to make exercise a habit, like brushing teeth, and part of their everyday recreational activity, like watching TV,” said Goh.⁹

To inject vigour into the workout and widen its reach, the Health Ministry engaged Adcom, an advertising agency, to create the workout video and song that embodied a distinct “Singapore flavour”. Adcom creative director David Miller composed a melody that melded a catchy workout tune with local ethnic beats,

including the lively Malay *joget*, before weaving in the lyrics.¹⁰ Miller tested the tune on his three-year-old daughter. “When she started jumping around, I thought it would be a success,” he recalled with a laugh.¹¹

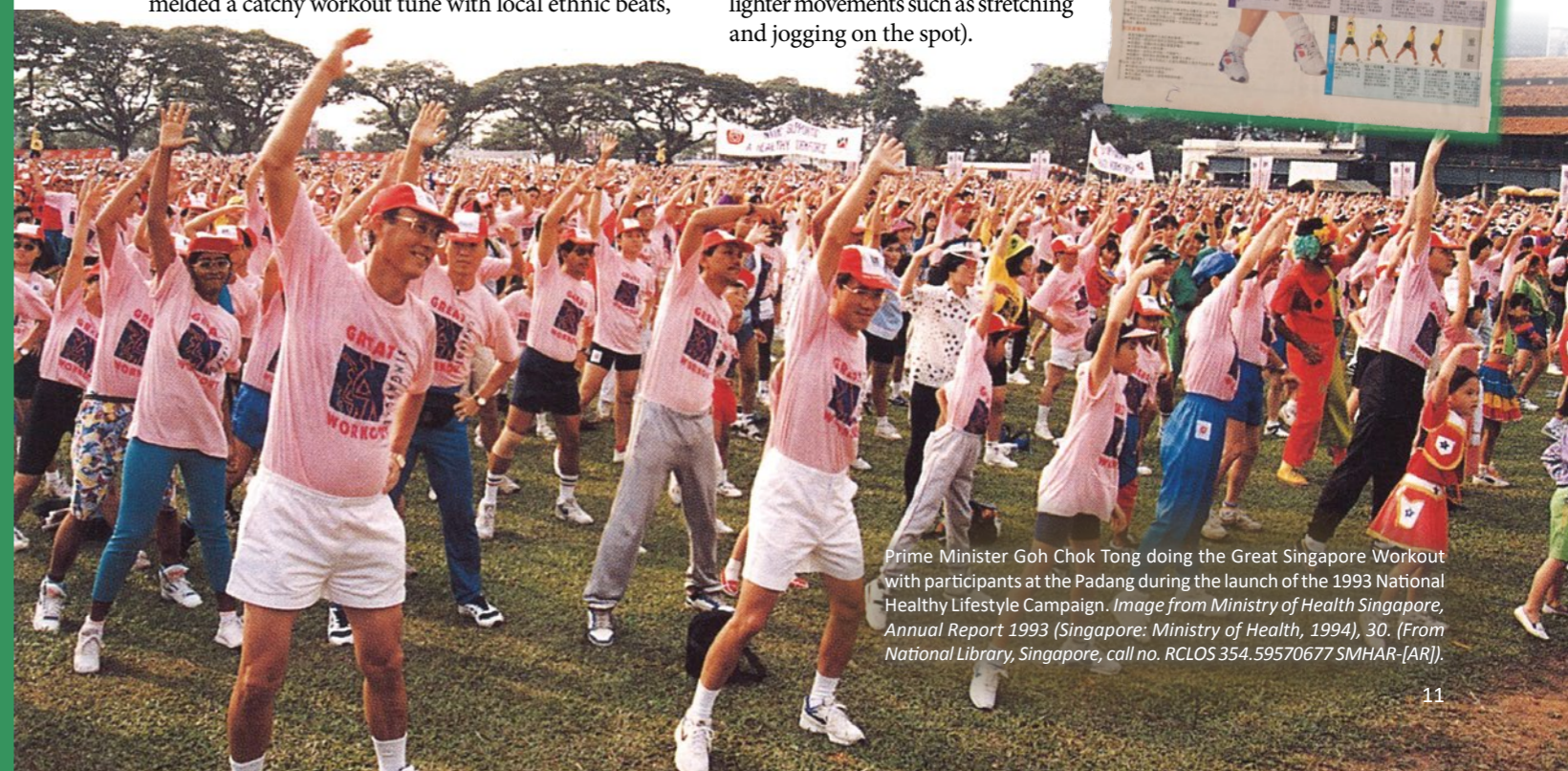
Miller worked with cameraman Geoff Oliver and the production crew from Panorama Films to create the exercise video. Filmed over four days in July 1993 at various locations across Singapore, the video featured fitness instructors doing the workout who were also joined by Singaporeans of different ages, professions and ethnicities.¹² The video ended with a mass workout involving some 200 people, including cameos by sports personalities Joscelin Yeo and Ang Peng Siong, comedians Moe Alkaff and Wang Sa, and television stars Zaleha Hamid and Chen Liping.¹³

It’s Workout Time

In the lead-up to the official launch of the workout, a marketing blitz was carried out to promote it and encourage the public to learn the steps. The workout video and audio tapes were distributed free-of-charge to schools and organisations and sold in retail outlets, while instructional spreads showing the workout steps were published in local newspapers. Additionally, a series of “warm-up” events were organised throughout September to introduce the workout to the public.¹⁴

On 30 September and 1 October 1993, during ACES (All Children Exercising Simultaneously) Day, approximately half a million students across primary and secondary schools, junior colleges and kindergartens did the workout (those from the primary and kindergarten levels were given a shorter 10-minute “shape-up kids” routine that combined simpler and lighter movements such as stretching and jogging on the spot).

An instructional page from *Lianhe Zaobao* showing the steps of the Great Singapore Workout, 3 October 1993. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.*



Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong doing the Great Singapore Workout with participants at the Padang during the launch of the 1993 National Healthy Lifestyle Campaign. *Image from Ministry of Health Singapore, Annual Report 1993 (Singapore: Ministry of Health, 1994), 30. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCLOS 354.59570677 SMHAR-[AR]).*

Variations of the Workout

Between 1993 and 1998, the Great Singapore Workout was a mass event. However, from 1999, the workout was decentralised. It was also used by schools and the community as a warm-up programme before any sports events.¹⁵

Over the years, there have been variations to the original routine to suit different fitness levels and purposes. In 1994, for Prisons Healthy Lifestyle Day, Changi Prison inmates performed a *taiji* version of the workout in a slower beat followed by the actual workout. “By doing two versions of the workout, we are mixing Eastern and Western styles. The *taiji* style also helps us to warm up first before exerting ourselves for the actual workout,” said an inmate.¹⁶ (*Taiji* is an ancient Chinese martial art developed for combat and self-defence, but has since evolved into a sport and form of exercise.)

In 1996, schools adopted the Fun and Fitness Workout, a more energetic and upbeat version estimated to be three times more vigorous than the original workout. The 15-minute routine, choreographed by the Singapore Fitness Instructors’ Association, consisted of three parts – warm-up, an aerobic segment and a cool-down.¹⁷

Private companies also introduced their own workout such as the Great Motorola Workout by

(Left) The poster for the launch of the Great Singapore Workout at the Padang on 3 October 1993. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Below) School children doing the Great Singapore Workout on ACES (All Children Exercising Simultaneously) Day in 1993. Image from Ministry of Health Singapore, Annual Report 1993 (Singapore: Ministry of Health, 1994), 30. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RCL05 354.59570677 SMHAR-[AR]).



A screengrab from the “Great Singapore Workout” video showing instructors performing the steps of the exercise routine. Image from Ministry of Health, “Great Singapore Workout,” 11 July 1994, video, 32:54. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. 1995000807).

Motorola Electronics, which became a seven-minute low-impact aerobic routine. The workout was also modified for the wheelchair-bound. It became a routine consisting largely of upper body movements.¹⁸

In 2001, the Health Promotion Board (HPB) introduced a new workout to complement the original version. Called “Work Fit”, the 20-minute routine targeted the body’s major muscle groups by combining movements from different sports and games, including bowling, boxing, tennis and even golf. Developed by fitness consultants from the private sector and the Singapore Sports Council, the workout could be done “by almost anyone, anywhere” or “as a quick exercise fix in the office”.¹⁹

Eight years later, in 2009, the HPB created the New Great Singapore Workout which incorporated “strength training and aerobic movements which were better suited to Singapore’s multiracial culture”. These included resistance band exercises and moves inspired by hip-hop, Malay dance, Indian dance, and Chinese *taiji* and *qigong* (an ancient Chinese system of physical exercise and meditation that combines movement, breathing and mental concentration).²⁰

Local bank POSB put its own spin on things. In 2015, it rolled out “The Neighbourhood Workout” consisting of six moves “synonymous with Singapore”: “selfie snap”, “prata flip”, “kaya spread”, “shopping bag drag”, “MRT squeeze” and “bus balance”. The video showed people performing the moves in different parts of Singapore such as at a lift landing, in a corridor and at a hawker centre. Within two weeks of the video being uploaded on POSB’s Facebook page, it had received more than 100,000 views.²¹

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the original workout in 2018, the HPB launched a new version, calling it “The Greater Singapore Workout”. Comprising 11 exercises, the workout, like the original, is “made simple, fun and engaging” so that it could be followed by “anyone, young or old”, and performed “in any setting”.²²

While familiar moves from the 1993 version were retained in the refreshed iteration, the new workout had a more upbeat tune and featured different sets of upper body, lower body and full body movements. It also included new moves “inspired by everyday actions to strike a chord with Singaporeans” such as “Mozzie Clap”, “Puddle Hop”, “Kiasu Chope” and “Teh Tarik”.²³



A screengrab from Health Promotion Board’s “Greater Singapore Workout” video showing instructors performing “The Kiasu Chope” move, 2018. Image from “National Steps Challenge™ Presents The Greater Singapore Workout!” hpbsg, 11 November 2018, YouTube video, 5:53.

Soon You’ll Be Feeling Just Fine

The official launch of the Great Singapore Workout in 1993 marked the inaugural Healthy Lifestyle Day, signalling the commencement of the month-long National Healthy Lifestyle Campaign. The push by the Health Ministry to get people to exercise has borne fruit. The 2021 National Population Health Survey revealed that 32.5 percent of Singapore residents aged 18 to 74 years engaged in regular exercise during their leisure time, a significant improvement from the 13.6 percent in 1992.²⁴

The explosion in the number of gyms around Singapore is just one very visible example of how people in Singapore are taking exercise more seriously now compared to four decades ago. Perhaps enough Singaporeans gave the workout a try and discovered that the song’s closing lyrics were true:

*Just give it a go
And what do you know
Soon you’ll be feeling just fine ♦*

NOTES

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- 3 Magdalene Lum, “The Making of a Great Workout,” *Straits Times*, 26 September 1993, 9; “Message from the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health, Dr Kwa Soon Bee,” *Straits Times*, 1 October 1993, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
- 4 Ministry of Health, *National Health Survey 1992: Highlights of Main Survey Findings* (Singapore: Singapore: Research and Evaluation Department, Ministry of Health, 1993), 2–3. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 614.425957 NAT)
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- 7 Pereira, “The Great Singapore Workout”; Lum, “The Making of a Great Workout.”
- 8 Lum, “The Making of a Great Workout.”
- 9 Lum, “The Making of a Great Workout”; Pereira, “15-Minute Five-Step Way to Lose 100 Calories”; “Message from the Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong,” *Straits Times*, 1 October 1993, 1. (From NewspaperSG)
- 10 Lum, “The Making of a Great Workout.”
- 11 Lum, “The Making of a Great Workout.”
- 12 Ministry of Health, “Great Singapore Workout,” 11 July 1994, video, 32:54. (From National Archives of Singapore, accession no. 1995000807)
- 13 Lum, “The Making of a Great Workout.”
- 14 Lum, “The Making of a Great Workout”; “Page 23 Advertisements Column 1: Great Singapore Workout,” *Straits Times*, 19 September, 1993, 23; “Do the Singapore Workout – At Home,” *Straits Times*, 9 September 1993, 20; “No Sweat for Dairy!,” *Straits Times*, 20 September 1993, 24; “Warming Up to the Workout,” *Straits Times*, 26 September 1993, 26. (From NewspaperSG)
- 15 “Exercise: The Office Workout,” *Straits Times*, 11 September 1999, 60. (From NewspaperSG)

THE GREAT SINGAPORE WORKOUT SONG LYRICS

Get out of your seat
On to your feet
Get your body moving
like mine
It’s Singapore, Singapore
Workout Time

So don’t be shy
Give it a try
Stretch your arms
Your legs and your spine
It’s Singapore, Singapore
Workout Time

Come on, Dad
Come on, Mum
Family fitness is so much fun
Just give it a go
And what do you know
Soon you’ll be feeling just fine
It’s Singapore, Singapore
Workout Time



Scan this QR code to watch the original video.

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- 17 “Move to a New Workout Beat,” *Straits Times*, 7 September 1996, 29. (From NewspaperSG)
- 18 “60 Companies Now Have Health Facilitators for Staff,” *Straits Times*, 13 October 1994, 23; “Easy Exercises for the Wheelchair-Bound,” *Straits Times*, 20 February 1995, 20. (From NewspaperSG)
- 19 “Get a Quick Fix in the Office With Work Fit,” *Straits Times*, 9 September 2001, 4; “Working to Fitness,” *Straits Times*, 9 September 2001, 5. (From NewspaperSG)
- 20 Health Promotion Board, Singapore, “Singapore Comes Together to Celebrate 20 Years of Healthy Lifestyle,” press release, 27 October 2012. (From National Archives of Singapore, document no. 20121103001; “Have a Go at the New Great Singapore Workout,” *Straits Times*, 26 July 2012, 8. (From NewspaperSG)
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- 22 Health Promotion Board, “Refreshed Version of ‘The Great Singapore Workout’ Rolled Out at the 2018 Healthy Lifestyle Festival SG, Marking 25 Years of Its Creation,” press release, 11 November 2018, <https://www.hpb.gov.sg/newsroom/article/refreshed-version-of-the-great-singapore-workout-rolled-out-at-the-2018-healthy-lifestyle-festival-sg-marking-25-years-of-its-creation>.
- 23 Health Promotion Board, *Annual Report 2018/2019* (Singapore: Health Promotion Board, 2020), 27–28, https://www.hpb.gov.sg/docs/default-source/annual-reports/hpb-annual-report-2018_2019.pdf; Health Promotion Board, “National Steps Challenge™ Presents The Greater Singapore Workout!”, 11 November 2018, hpbsg, YouTube video, 5:53, <https://youtu.be/rRt3tXSG-U8?si=MkKm4nWbvCfr2-k>.
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