

Power of Play

The environmental programme is in the *home stretch*.

We shall continue to stress the need for transparency and a *level playing field* for all businesses.

The hotels and transport system are simply not *up to scratch* at the moment.



Any idea what the highlighted expressions have in common? A sports lover should know the answer at a glance: they are all derived from sports and games. Thanks to the extensive coverage of sporting events by the mass media, many sports terms have been incorporated into the English language as idiomatic expressions. The most popular sources of sports-related idioms are such games as sailing, horseback riding, cards and baseball, which have been played for many years.

Take the above expressions. The *home stretch*, or *home straight*, is the last part of a race where there is a straight line to the finish. It may also refer to the last part of any activity or journey. A *level playing field* has its origin in turf pitch sports like football, hockey and cricket. It has come to mean a situation in which different companies, countries, etc can all compete fairly because no one enjoys special treatment. This expression has become a household term in Hong Kong since a level playing field is a major factor contributing to the city's success as an international business hub. *Up to scratch*, a horseracing term meaning capable of winning, is used to refer to nearly anything that is good enough for a particular standard, such as lunch menu, video performance, one's English proficiency and the qualities of leaders (but it is more likely to occur in the negative form *not up to scratch*).

As the well-known American saying "work hard and play hard" tells us, people in the United States love to play. Since sports and games play such an important role in American way of life, terms associated with play have been widely used in work and business situations. Team sports, like football and baseball, have captured the corporate imagination to such a degree that people working on a project are called the *team* and a project *a ball*. A quality control team is composed of *team players* who do not want to *drop the ball*; their *goal* is to produce a superior product, to *score* in the marketing world by selling these products.

One is expected to *play fair*, not only in a game, but in every other day-to-day situation. Similarly, *the rules of the game* means more than the rules of a card game or a sporting event. It may refer to how business is transacted, how schools work, how life is played and the way many other everyday events should be.

Indeed, play is often associated with serious business in our work, the most common example being *the close of play*. While in sports *the close of play* simply means the end of say, a cricket or football match, in the office this simple idiomatic expression will, more often than not, make you sit up and take notice as it invariably refers to the deadline set for a task or an assignment. *The close of play* seems to be a favourite among civil servants in Hong Kong. For example, *by close of play today* means *by the end of the working day*. While it is vague enough to allow flexibility (no exact deadline is given), sometimes its exact meaning may not be readily grasped since the end of one's working day may vary from office to office, or from individual to individual. For example, how would you interpret *by close of play today* when you receive a request for urgent drafting at 7:00 pm?

Work while you work, play while you play.

Old Adage



普通話節 2004

去年香港推廣普通話大聯盟 (以下簡稱“大聯盟”) 和語文教育及研究常務委員會 (以下簡稱“語常會”) 合辦為期兩個月的“普通話節2003”, 籌辦了一系列活動, 以帶動學習和多講普通話的風氣。各項活動備受社會各界支持, 得到熱烈回響。今年大聯盟和語常會再接再厲, 舉辦“普通話節2004”, 於九月九日至十一月二十八日期間, 推出多項精彩活動, 包括“全港普通話歌唱大賽”、“全港家庭親子普通話才藝大賽”和“全港精英名人流動普通話問答比賽”等。

公務員事務局法定語文事務部是大聯盟的成員, 除呼籲各政府部門積極響應外, 更籌辦活動, 鼓勵同事多聽多講普通話, 協助宣揚“說好普通話, 開創新天下”的訊息。今年, 我們再度為全港公務員舉辦網上普通話常識問答比賽, 以及在普通話節期間推出“普通話知多少”, 在公務員事務局網頁介紹日常用語的粵普對照。這些活動實用與趣味並重, 同事可藉此練習地道的普通話, 加深對普通話的認識。