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Taking giant step with rally debut

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ON Feb 25, Motosikal Dan Enjin Nasional announced its pact with three-time former world motorcycle champion Kenny Roberts to race Malaysia's motorcycle against the world's best.

Modenas, which launched its first 110cc underbone motorcycle last year, will be taking a giant step in its debut in the 500cc class of the World Motorcycle Championship.

The pact is the latest move to manifest Malaysia's commitment to "go big" into motorsports since Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad voiced Malaysia's intention to host one leg of the 1999 World Formula One Grand Prix. Malaysian motorsports has never been bigger than it is today.

In fact, it has today become a race by itself among the big private corporations which once barely supported or kept a good distance from the sport.

Who would ever have guessed that Malaysia Airports Berhad would take the initiative to build what will be the country's first racing circuit in Sepang, designed specifically to cater for Formula One races?

Petronas, the national oil company, meanwhile, is in its second year of sponsoring the Petronas-Red Bull Sauber Formula One Racing Team.

An unexpected decision by the Cabinet last year also made Malaysia the first country in the world to sponsor a Formula One racing team.

The Malaysian Government has approved an allocation of RM24 million a year to sponsor the Stewart-Ford Racing Team for the next two years.

It is only natural that efforts to turn Malaysia into a hub for motorsports, is not well-received by everyone. In fact, some have boldly described the expensive involvement as a "waste".

But how does one quantify or justify where or what Malaysia gains?

Petronas, in sponsoring a Formula One team, did so with the aim of learning engine technology and using the world's most testing platforms to conduct further research on its fuel and lubricants.

The pact with Stewart-Ford Racing Team also has similar objectives, with an added interest to learn composite technology.

Arguably, the results of all these initiatives will not be seen immediately.

But the results we see today in the market should be enough to illustrate the commitment needed and benefits to be had.

The simplest example of how motorsports has helped the automotive industry can be seen by carefully examining Proton's 1.8-litre Wira car. The car, which is said to be among the manufacturer's best works, was conceptualised for road use after being designed specifically for racing.

Today, the Proton Satria is also heading in a similar direction. On March 1, the car competed in the Safari Rally in Africa, dubbed one of the most gruelling events in the World Rally Championship.

While racing abroad is also done for promotional purposes and to build the national car's image overseas, research and development which goes into making the car competitive is also transferred into the design for road cars.

Critics may argue that much of the progress made would have come from Proton's variant, the Mitsubishi, but looking further, they should ask how long until the first 100 per cent Malaysian-built car rolls off the production line.

With the recent acquisition of Lotus Cars Limited - a company renowned

for its engine and design technology - Proton's possibilities in automotive engineering are endless.

On a smaller but no less significant scale, Malaysian-made Siverstone tyres for instance, have been using rallying, racing and off-road activities as a platform to enhance the quality of its tyres.

Perusahaan Otomobil Kedua is also putting its pint-sized Kancil to test in rallying, and despite criticisms of the car being underpowered, it turned heads when the car emerged champion inf last year's Malaysian Rally Championship.

Modenas' approach, however controversial it may seem, is to take a giant step to enhance Malaysia's automotive industry.

Although now limited to producing underbone motorcycles with assistance from Kawasaki, it is obvious that whatever knowledge gained from racing in the 500cc class will go to the development of a future Malaysian-made superbike.

What makes the deal far more promising is the fact that Roberts had designed his own engine, and has invited Malaysia to tap into his pool of engineering and automotive expertise.

The approach taken by Modenas is identical to that of Italian manufacturers Cagiva and Aprilia in the early 90s before introducing their motorcycles into a Japanese-monopolised industry.

Mitsubishi Motors Corporation of Japan represents one of Asia's finest examples of successful motorsports involvement since its Lancer began rallying in 1962.

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