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Ex-racing ace Stewart pays tribute to Dr M

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Former Formula One champion Jackie Stewart today paid tribute to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for successfully bringing the F1 - the ultimate in motorsports - to Malaysia.

Bernama reported that Stewart, known as The Flying Scot, said the Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix would give greater prominence to the Asia-Pacific region as a venue for the championship usually held in Western countries.

"During my planned 20-minute meeting with the Prime Minister which stretched to about one-and-a-half hours, I was struck by his wide knowledge about Formula One and enthusiasm in bringing the F1 to Malaysia," he said.

Stewart said Dr Mahathir saw a perfect opportunity for Malaysia to host the championship at a time when the idea would hardly have crossed anybody's mind.

The former driving ace, who is the executive chairman of the Stewart-Ford Grand Prix team, said this during a cocktail organised by HSBC Bank Malaysia Bhd to fete the team's two drivers, Johnny Herbert and Rubens Barrichello.

The HSBC Holdings plc group is the largest non-technical group to sponsor a F1 team.

Stewart, who won the F1 three times in 1969, 1971 and 1973, has driven in 99 Grand Prix races with 27 victories.

He was inducted into the International Motorsports Hall of Fame in 1990.

Malaysia's bid to host the F1 began with Petronas' sponsorship of the Swiss F1 Sauber Team three years ago.

It won the bid following discussions between Dr Mahathir and Formula One Constructors' Association president Bernie Ecclestone in Lisbon, Portugal, in September 1996.

Thereafter, this led to Malaysia building the ultra-modern RM286 million 5.542km Sepang circuit, reputedly the best in the world.

Earlier in Shah Alam, Zuraimi Abdullah reported the Stewart-Ford Grand Prix team feels it will be more successful in the Formula One Grand Prix championship next year or 2001.

"It takes four or five years (from the time a team is set up) to be really successful. In 2000 or 2001, we'll be in the contention to win not just Grand Prix races but also the World Championship," Stewart said.

Stewart spoke to reporters after visiting the assembly plant of Ford's Malaysian operations, Amim Holdings Sdn Bhd, today.

The Stewart-Ford team has been participating in the world's largest sports event for two-and-a-half years and Stewart described its involvement as "successful".

The team is currently in fifth place with 31 points, thanks largely to Herbert and Barrichello's first- and third-placed finishings respectively at the Grand Prix in Nurburgring, Germany, recently.

The Stewart-Ford team - to be known as the Jaguar Racing Team next season - is just two points behind fourth-placed Winfield Williams Supertech and a further 26 points adrift third-placed Jordan Mugen-Honda.

"We have been successful although we have only been racing for two-and-a-half years. We had achieved first, second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth place, and had pole positions and fastest laps."

On his team's chances in the race on Sunday, Stewart said he did not

expect to win but had hopes of collecting some points to boost the team's aim of being among the top four teams this season.

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