

03/10/1999

Basir in the fast lane

Radzi Sapiee

MANY might know Tan Sri Basir Ismail as a jack-of-all-trades.

The 72-year-old agriculture graduate has headed several Government agencies in diverse fields and large corporations such as Bank Bumiputra and national oil company Petronas.

But as a Malaysian racing supremo? That could turn out to be his next post.

Currently, he is the chairman of Malaysia Airports Berhad (MAB) but fate has made him the man responsible for bringing the Formula One to Malaysia.

Basir negotiated with Formula One supremo Bernie Ecclestone to secure the rights to hold the ultimate motorsport event here - for seven years starting with the inaugural Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix at MAB's Sepang F1 Circuit on Oct 15-17.

Still, he repeatedly pointed out that it would not have happened if Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed himself hadn't asked for it.

"The Prime Minister has been thinking of bringing the Formula One to Malaysia since we held the Motorcycle Grand Prix in 1991," he said.

"What I and MAB officials did was to put it in black and white. That was in 1996 at the Estoril circuit in Portugal. The Prime Minister was also there to watch the Formula One Grand Prix."

That was also the first year Petronas sponsored Swiss Formula One outfit Sauber and Basir was asked by Dr Mahathir if he could stage the event in Malaysia.

"It was the perfect opportunity. Ecclestone was introduced to us three months before. So naturally I approached him and asked if we could hold the Formula One in Malaysia," Basir said.

"It was almost too easy. Ecclestone said why not - if we have a Formula One circuit. That basically started the ball rolling." Basir added.

Ecclestone also recommended German's Tilke Engineering who built Austria's A-1 Ring as Sepang's circuit consultant and by the end of 1996, the plan for the circuit was presented to Dr Mahathir was approved.

Construction began in November 1997 and the track costing RM286 million was completed a year later.

But enough about the circuit. What many in the motorsport fraternity would like to know is whether Basir, who is also the chairman of Sepang International Circuit (SIC), knows anything about racing.

"I admit that I knew nothing at all," said Basir. "But after 1996, I began to learn quite a lot about racing."

Asked if he could predict the outcome of a Formula One race based on the drivers' set-up, the given circuit, weather forecast and other variables, he said he had yet to reach that level.

"But I know Ecclestone and the top officials in the FIA (International Automobile Association) and also the bosses of the Formula One teams. And more importantly, I know we will have a successful Formula One event," said Basir.

So can he be the Malaysian racing supremo? We'll see after the Malaysian Grand Prix. SIC are also planning to hold other races at their circuit and if everything goes well, then Basir might just be the right man.

(END)