

01/10/1999

Formula won

M Reezal

IN SEPTEMBER 1996 at the Portuguese Grand Prix, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad startled the motor racing world by announcing that Malaysia would host one leg of the World Formula 1 Championship. He went on to announce that a Formula 1 circuit would be built specifically for this purpose. The staging of the event, he explained, would allow greater exposure for Malaysia and trigger spinoffs in the local automotive industry. Now three years later, that promise has become reality and the Grand Prix has come to town.

The announcement may have been like a bolt out of the blue, but how magnificently the parties concerned with putting this grand plan into motion have responded.

In August 1997, Malaysia Airports Berhad signed a landmark five-year contract to host the World Formula 1 Championship starting 1999. The company also formed a special team to oversee Formula 1 and began a programme to send its officials to Grand Prixes all over the world to gain technical expertise and organising skills.

A month later, in September, construction of the Formula 1 circuit in Sepang began. The site chosen was a 900-hectare plot within the vicinity of the newly-opened Kuala Lumpur International Airport. The Sepang circuit, now completed, can cater for 130,000 spectators and is fitted with state-of-the-art facilities.

At about the same time in 1997, Petronas announced that it had acquired 40 per cent equity of a joint venture company called Sauber Petronas Engineering AG. A year earlier, Petronas had hopped on board the Grand Prix bus by becoming a sponsor for the Red Bull Sauber Formula 1 Team as part of the company's globalisation programme. In a further agreement signed in March 1996, Petronas became the main sponsor for the team which then became known as the Red Bull Sauber Petronas Formula 1 team.

What does it cost to bring the leading Formula 1 teams to this country?

Answer: Some RM70 million. All the 30,000 grandstand seats have been sold, and through advertising and sponsors, the organisers have already raked in some RM20 million.

The 18 corporate seats at RM250,000 each have all been sold, as are the paddock club seats at US\$ 4,000 (RM15,200) each. That leaves another 50,000 tickets available to race fans. The target group for these seats are Malaysian motor-racing enthusiasts. Tickets are priced at RM150 a day and RM250 for the three days. If a family of four wants to watch the Malaysian GP, it will have to fork out RM1,000. No one can ever say that a Formula 1 race gives a cheap thrill!

The race for the title remained wide open after Round 13 of the Championships which was the Italian Grand Prix in Monza in the second week of September. At the time of printing (before the European Grand Prix at Nurburgring in Germany at the end of September), Eddie Irvine and Mika Hakkinen shared top spot in the drivers' standings.

Heinz-Harald Frentzen's dramatic Monza win in his Jordan-Mugen Honda after Hakkinen spun out when in the lead gave the German driver a chance of winning this year's world driver's title. He moved to within 10 points of the championship leaders with three races remaining.

Malaysians might want to watch out for Jean Alesi and Pedro Diniz, driving for the Red Bull Sauber-Petronas team. Alesi, who will be replaced by Finn Mika Salo next season, has one point while the junior Diniz has

three championship points (excluding the European Grand Prix result).
At the time of writing, it is still not certain whether Michael
Schumacher would have recovered enough from injury to drive for Ferrari.
His presence will only boost the prestige and excitement which the
Petronas Malaysian Formula 1 Grand Prix deserves. Get well quickly,
Michael!