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Spotlight on sports

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THE Culture, Arts and Tourism Ministry recently pledged to stage more international sporting events as a way to promote the tourism industry.

Its Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir says this marketing shift will be a shot in the arm for tourism as Malaysia's capability in organising such high profile events will be an added advantage to the country's traditional selling points like its diverse cultures, natural attractions and history.

In fact, the schedule for the next two years is quite an impressive one. The last quarter of the year will see Kuala Lumpur play host to two international events - motor racing's Formula One Grand Prix at the Sepang F1 circuit in October and the World Cup Golf in November at Mines Resort City.

Next year the capital city will be the venue of the World table tennis team championships, bringing in players from more than 120 countries in February. In 2002 Malaysia will hold the World Cup hockey finals.

Except for Formula One motor racing, the other international events are no stranger to the local sports arena. Malaysian officials have had organising exposure at that level.

But nothing is impossible as long as we believe and work for it. The Sepang International F1 Circuit, which was officially opened in March, should present such a challenge.

The circuit is the brainchild of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who once said: "If you have the will and do something with full commitment, you are bound to succeed."

Come October, local motorsports aficionados will get to experience first hand the glamour and thrills of high speed duels at the F1 circuit.

The event will see big names heating up the racing track while the country plays hosts to thousands among the sport's loyal and global following.

Speaking of being in the fast lane, Malaysia is not content in being a stopover for the high profile series, it is also hoping to produce top class racers.

Our bright F1 prospect is young Alex Yoong who is predicted to get a F1 drive in another year by past triple F1 champion and owner of the Stewart F1 team, Jackie Stewart.

"Yoong is already shining in F3 and going by his progress, probably has to spend one more year before he makes the grade to Formula One," Stewart said in a recent interview with the local media.

Stewart also said "Yoong has the desire and passion for the sport and physically he has improved a lot to last the pace of the races".

With local interest in racing is growing and with the coming F1, Yoong's popularity is set to rise in tandem. Not surprisingly, Yoong was recently announced as the "Brylcreem Boy" for Malaysia.

While Manchester United sharpshooter David Beckham serves the hair-care brand internationally, Yoong is the region's ambassador.

The sponsorship deal will see Yoong representing Brylcreem for a minimum of two years and comes as a boost to his dream of becoming Malaysia's first F1 driver.

"I feel great because Brylcreem chose a Malaysian to represent the brand. I believe the brand is perfect for a Malaysian guy on the go like

myself," Yoong said during the signing ceremony.

Alex was chosen because he embodies the qualities Brylcreem reflects - confidence, success, style and control. As a world-class race driver, he has them in abundance.

"In fact, he also embodies our new slogan for Malaysia 'Be in Control' since to be a championship race driver you need perfect confidence, perfect control," said Brylcreem finance director Ooi Hun Chuan.

But the deal was just a small part in helping Yoong achieve his goal, added Ooi who declined to reveal the exact amount of the sponsorship.

Prior to the deal, the Government has endorsed the "Alex Yoong Racing for Malaysia" project by funding RM10.5 million of the RM14 million required to help Alex get into Formula 1 by the end of 2001.

The family of Yoong will come up with the balance of RM3.5 million (- 700,000) over the next three years after having invested about RM6 million on Yoong's career so far. Some 40 per cent of the investment from 1991 to now si from sponsors.

By the rate things are going, it seems quite possible to see Yoong's signature Jalur Gemilang helmet among the likes of Schumacher and Hakkinen in the next F1 championship.

In the meantime, racing fans my find two websites - www.alexyoong.com and www.malaysiagp.com.my - interesting.

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