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Let's have winners among wonders

ADD the Sepang International Circuit (SIC) to the list of Malaysian wonders - bragging rights, as the envious would call it.

We have every right to be proud of the SIC for it is an architectural and engineering triumph.

Like the Petronas Twin Towers, the National Stadium at Bukit Jalil and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, SIC is another glittering example of what Malaysia is capable of.

Today's grand opening of the circuit by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a reassurance that the indomitable Malaysian spirit can prevail over adversity.

That we can strive for, and achieve, the best no matter the odds.

The world sneered and called us show-offs when, with a budget of more than RM1 billion, the government built the fabulous 100,000-capacity National Stadium, a gymnastics stadium seating 16,000, a 12,000-capacity hockey stadium, a netball stadium for 4,000 people and a swimming arena seating 4,000 people for the 1998 Commonwealth Games.

The resounding success of the Games, hailed as the best ever by all who participated, was more than justification. It was a triumph of confidence, and faith, in the Malaysian way.

The international exposure gained from the live telecast of the Games dispelled a whole lot of misconceptions and lies about our country. It also served to enhance the identity and reputation of a nation long dismissed as that stretch of land above Singapore.

SIC continues that fine tradition. Already, even before the first major race is flagged off, it is being hailed as the best Formula One circuit in the world by foreign experts and motor racing journalists.

It will host one leg of the World Motorcycle Grand Prix on April 18 and the Formula One race on Oct 18. These two events should, once again, put Malaysia on the world map. But the main attraction is the state-of-the-art circuit. The most outstanding feature is the double frontage grandstand that can accommodate 30,000 spectators. The only circuit in the world with such a facility where fans can watch the race down two straights.

At the tip of the grandstand is the three-storey canopy tower where its unique design enables fans to watch 80 to 90 per cent of the race. It can accommodate 1,100 spectators.

In fact, SIC is so spectator friendly that anywhere you sit, you can watch at least 30-40 per cent of a race. Something very unique because at most of the other existing circuits around the world, fans only get to see the race when the cars pass their stand. The track itself, the way it is designed, should thrill both racers and spectators.

It has eight straights and 15 turns and provides plenty of opportunities for high-speed overtaking with its width of 16 metres.

Apart from all that, the circuit is equipped with state-of-the-art electronic systems, including on-line, real-time tracking system for the race cars.

It is also the first track in the world to install the electronic marshall posts. Instead of coloured flags, the posts will flash coloured signals to inform drivers and riders of what's happening on the track.

To top it all, SIC is set in a lush tropical forest with a motocross track, theme park, golf course and go-kart track. It is indeed the best F1 circuit in the world. Unique, and awesome, like so many things Malaysian.

But like all wonders of the world, it can only be a source of vicarious pleasure and pride until a Malaysian is crowned champion there.

After all, while we look upon the wonders of the world, with awe, we often wonder what happened to the civilisations that built them.

What happened to the ancient Egyptians? The Mayans, the Aztecs and the Incas? The Moguls of India whose Shah Jahan built that monument to love - the Taj Mahal?

What happened to the dynasty which built the Great Wall of China? The Roman Empire which made sport of throwing Christians and slaves to the lions at the Coliseum.

They disappeared in the shifting sands of history, often beaten by the very people they oppressed and used in glorifying their greatness.

Those who battled in the arena of the Coliseum were the ones who eventually overthrew the Romans grown soft and corrupt in their self-indulgent opulence.

The tribes who honed their battle skills on the Great Wall finally ruled China.

The Pharaohs of Egypt were finally buried by the descendents of the very slaves who built the pyramids.

Monuments, more than the builders, serve best those who know how to benefit from them.

So, too, those wonderful sporting venues that we have built. They will only be of any good if Malaysian sportsmen and women utilise them to raise their standards. To evolve into world beaters.

Otherwise, it will only benefit the host of foreign athletes who will use the fabulous facilities to showcase their own skills and talents.

For these edifices are not showpieces to be simply glorified over. They are temples of sporting endeavour. Theban theatres of triumph and tragedy. They demand command performances of the highest order, not the bumbling, bungling acts of clowns.

They are there to provide athletes with the inspiration and thrill of grand conception. The exhilaration of feverish achievement. The profound satisfaction of realisation. Then, perhaps, accolades and immortality.

That is what our sportsmen and women should strive for - starring roles instead of the bit parts they have become accustomed to play.

Otherwise, these venues would be, instead of monuments to our sporting excellence, just metaphors for our shortcomings. Our failings.

More than civilisations, it is individual triumph that best personifies greatness and which is best remembered.

The honest excavation of history can bring sobering discoveries. We don't want some archaeologist of the distant future digging up our sports venues and saying: "What great builders they were. I wonder who they were and what happened to them?"

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