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Yoong in for surprise

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RACER Alexander Yoong will have a pleasant surprise when he returns home after finishing his rounds in the ongoing British Formula Three championship this month.

The Sports Ministry, who have been monitoring his development and recognising his potential to be the first Malaysian to race the Formula One circuit, have decided to help his plans to get a ride with a Formula One team.

Sports Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said he intended to discuss the matter with Yoong as soon as he gets back and would personally approach Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for further assistance.

"We recognise Alex's talents and we've been following his development as he looked for sponsors to help him get on with his programmes in Formula Three," he said yesterday.

"Although the Ministry so far have no particular policy regarding the development of F1 racers, we feel he is almost there and we hoped to assist him in his bid to make it as early as he can."

Muhyiddin said the Ministry had given Yoong a grant of RM150,000 before he went for the British championship in March.

He said it was not under any particular Government programme as the Ministry recognised it would take tens of millions of ringgit to develop a Formula One driver from scratch but they consider Yoong a special case.

"It was a token sum. We noted that he has been searching high and low for funding, including getting some from the Royal Military College old boys association of whom his father is a member," he said.

And with national petroleum company Petronas currently financing and getting involved with a Formula One team, the Petronas Sauber team, there is a possibility that Muhyiddin will also put Yoong's case to them.

"We will try to help where we can. We already have Petronas in F1 and if Yoong is ready, we can try and help him get into the team."

Last week, Yoong moved up 54 rungs to 214th in the world rankings for racing drivers following his sixth position in the Round Three of the British F3 championship the previous week.

The ranking puts him above one of Petronas Sauber's drivers, Brazilian Pedro Diniz, who was then ranked 248th. F1 world champion Mika Hakkinen currently tops the list.

Since then, Yoong has turned in two sensational performances with a fifth and second placing in Round Four and Five of the championship this week.

Yoong, who signed with the British-based Alan Docking Racing Team this year, has been racing in Europe since 1996 and planned to race in F1 by the year 2001.

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