

05/03/2000

Let's join hands to boost F1 earnings

Ahmad A. Talib

RONNIE is a die-hard fan of Formula One racing. At the inaugural F1 race at the Sepang circuit last year, Ronnie, in a Ferrari red T-shirt, was having an enjoyable time with his wife and two children.

Ronnie was also carrying and waving a Ferrari flag as a show of loyalty to the Italian car's worldwide following.

In fact, Ronnie, who is the owner-operator of one of Kuala Lumpur's famous "hotspots", simply loves to be involved in F1 events. With the first race just round the corner, he was thinking out loud as to what kind of promotions were being planned for this year.

Last year, Ronnie brought a model of a Ferrari F1 car into his cafe, having redecorated its interior with red all over.

He was encouraged by what he read in the newspapers a few days ago concerning the F1. It was a statement by Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin who announced that the Formula One race held last October earned the country more than RM500 million. The prestigious motoring event was beamed to 750 television stations in 260 countries to about 600 million viewers, thus enhancing Malaysia's image as an international centre for sports and tourism.

According to a survey, 65,000 foreign visitors and competitors were in Malaysia during the event, contributing more than RM500 million in foreign exchange earnings, the Minister pointed out, a fact which Ronnie said was not only pleasing but which begs to be improved upon.

Ronnie the F1 fan is also a hard-sell businessman, seeing opportunities and potential in many places. Having seen the benefits of F1 racing last year, Ronnie is more than eager to be involved this time around. While he may be doing his bit, Ronnie feels there's a lot more that can be done. Based on his own study and given the fact that the economy has picked up significantly since the Sepang race, Ronnie feels that a target in excess of RM1 billion should be the figure Malaysia is working on for this year's meet. The Malaysia Boleh spirit, he says, is being tested again.

Come to think of it, this shouldn't be difficult, provided that every effort is made early and comprehensively towards this end. If others can do it, so can we.

This newspaper at least, through a tie-up with HSBC, an established five-star promoter of F1 racing, is already doing it through the publication of a special focus section to be called F1 2000.

An early start to an F1 campaign is necessary. I feel that a national F1 committee needs to be formed. It should be headed by a sufficiently high-ranking personality and be given the mandate to undertake the job.

The committee members should include sports and tourism promoters, service providers such as hoteliers, transport operators, immigration and security officials, airlines and media representatives.

I recall attending a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Putrajaya last year, where he gave his outline and expectations of the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition. Even though Langkawi has hosted the exhibition several times, the Prime Minister was still very much involved in making sure that the event was staged properly.

Besides the main organisers, that meeting was also attended by other parties involved behind the scenes in staging an international event such as Lima.

Hence, I saw officials from various government departments such as immigration and security, representatives from hotels and taxi operators, contractors and other service providers such as telecommunications companies and restaurant owners.

For F1 promotion purposes, strong support from the people directly involved in tourism promotion is the key to increasing F1 revenue. If travel agencies with a global network and an international hotel chain can work out schemes that would complement each other's plans, then half the promotional work is done.

It must be noted that Malaysian F1 promotion overseas is more crucial than F1 promotion locally. After all, we do want to attract the foreign dollars.

It must be recalled that Daim said more than 50 per cent of the foreign investors flew in by Malaysia Airlines, while over 70 per cent of them stayed more than a week in local hotels.

With a bit more push, I don't see how we can't increase these figures that can give us a grand income of more than RM1 billion this time around. Count me in if there is a F1 campaign being planned out there.

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