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Sepang, Malaysia winners too

ALL the world loves a winner, especially those who keep on winning. Tiger Woods, short in years but long on achievements and establishing records, is admired by even fans to whom birdies, eagles and albatrosses were once simply birds of different plumage.

United, only Man U has the largest following of club football all over the world. It is the winningest team over the past decade in the English League.

And to the pantheon of great sporting names - they call them brands these days - on Sunday was added another two: Michael Schumacher and Ferrari.

The German, in the crimson livery of Ferrari, already a triple Formula 1 champion took the Italian stable to their second constructors' title, and their first double in 21 years.

The Italian town of Modena where church bells ring each time a Ferrari car wins a F1 Grand Prix race proposes an honorary citizenship for Michael. By now he is already a household name even in Malaysia where sporting tradition and passion has long centred on soccer and badminton.

Sepang was also a winner. It already won last year the ultimate accolade for the best F1 GP spectacle staged by the 16 circuits spread around the world.

It may or may not garner the same acclaim this year. But its track and facilities have been acknowledged by all, participants, officials and commentators, as the best in the world. Another successful organisation of the tail-end edition on the F1 calendar only adds to our growing reputation of hosting world-class sports events. It would surely strengthen our bid to host the 2006 Asian Games.

Malaysia is a winner too. The country earned its place on the GP racing map last year when it had its first F1 race.

This year it certainly was on the itinerary of hundreds of Germans, Finns, Scots and Brazilians who follow their idols round the globe. Because the Sepang edition came at the fag-end of the GP season, these visitors who came as sports fans surely would stay on as tourists, contributing much desirable foreign exchange.

The Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said on Sunday, the country could have earned as much as RM1 billion, given the price of tickets and the costs of board for the three days of the GP show. But Malaysian sports is still not a winner. Sporting fame is garnered on the field, the tracks and in the stadia.

It is earned by athletes not by managers and organisers of events. The latters' achievements, to be sure, should not be sneered. They are, however, transitory accomplishments. We stage a world-class event and we win acclaim for a while.

We become footnotes in GP history if say the venue for the F1 GP event is taken away from the Sepang International Circuit. For we must realise that no one remembers where the world record for the 200- and 400-metres sprints were broken. But most remember Michael Johnson.

Sure we have potential world-class sportsmen and sportswomen. Among the few knocking at the door of international stature are squash players, Ang Beng Hee and Nicol David who are currently notching upwards the international rankings. Young Alex Yoong is honing his driving skills in Formula Three racing in the Japanese circuit. But until he gains his

ticket to drive for a F1 stable, our aspirations to international fame and continued fortune in netting the tourist ringgit will rest with our ability to win bids to host and organise world-class sporting events. In the coming years even this might be even more competitive.

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