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When a Malaysian in F1?

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TO groom an F1 driver is never an overnight process and what more a world champion.

For Malaysians, the 2nd Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix recently had done wonders to boost interests in motorsports.

But while Malaysians have proven to be excellent hosts to great events, our participation shouldn't be limited to just that.

While it would be a historical achievement if a local driver makes the F1 cut, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in an interview after the race, didn't dismiss the idea of having a Malaysian team taking part in the F1.

When asked to comment on the possibility of the Lotus returning to F1, the Prime Minister said: "Nothing is impossible."

Sports Minister Datuk Hishamuddin Hussein, who will unveil a souped-up Rakan Muda programme specially designed for motorsports in January, has promised to build more go-kart tracks to cater for the youngsters.

"We have been looking closely at building go-kart tracks and have found that the use of car park areas for this purpose is in line with our Rakan Muda format," said Hishamuddin.

When asked if he was aware that the Batu Tiga Speedway Circuit is earmarked for development, he said: "If that's the case, then that will be the place where I'll host my first race."

However, don't count on whatever present initiatives taken to achieve this dream to transpire by the time the Sepang Circuit renews its F1 contract with the International Automobile Federation (FIA) after the 2005 season.

It has taken decades for countries such as Germany, Britain, Italy or Japan to unearth talents worthy of Formula One and before Malaysians embark on this mission, it's best for would-be administrators and aspiring drivers to heed the advice of those who know the business.

Jackie Stewart, a triple world champion and former owner of the Stewart-Ford outfit (which so proudly displayed the Malaysian banner on its cars two years ago), distinguished the passion to compete to having the passion to win.

"It's that passion to win that distinguishes Michael Schumacher from the rest of the drivers," said Stewart.

Schumacher, who dazzled the Sepang Circuit with another superb drive to win his career's 44th GP, said: "Don't take racing to the streets.

"You can go test your skills at the track but racing on public roads is not the way to enjoy motorsports," said the 2000 world champion.

Schumacher's brother Ralf, who drives for Williams-BMW, dared Malaysians to challenge drivers in Europe.

"For countries like Malaysia, I think it's a test to take part in F3 or F3000 Championships in Europe," said the German.

"That's the place where we all graduate from and you move on from there if you can do well."

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