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Sports-F1 (Minardi)

ALEX TO TEST MINARDI'S F1 CAR SOON

PUTRAJAYA, June 28 (Bernama) -- Alex Yoong will be testing the Minardi Formula One (F1) car soon and if everything turns out well Malaysia will have its very first Formula One driver at the Hungary Grand Prix this August, said team principal Paul Stoddart.

It was earlier speculated that Alex would get his chance to race in F1 at the British Grand Prix in Silverstone mid next month but Stoddart said that this would be too early.

"I think he has a chance this season but it won't be at Silverstone, I think that would be asking too much, too soon and it probably be unfair on Alex either.

"F1 cars are different to anything else, they are different to Formula 3000, to Formula Nippon, so he really does need to do some hours, get some testing and then we'll judge whether it will be right to put him in the car," he said.

Earlier Stoddart called on Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed here and spent about half-an-hour with the Prime Minister discussing the motorsport industry.

To a question, he said Alex stood a good chance of making his F1 debut at the Hungary GP if he adapted well to the car.

"It could be as early as Hungary, it may be as late as Indianapolis Grand Prix (September). It depends on Alex, when he is ready we will give him the opportunity.

"In my mind, if he adapts quite well to the car then Hungary is a real possibility," said Stoddart.

On the testing of F1 car, he said some drivers were natural and quickly adapted to the super-fast car while others needed more time.

At the same time, Stoddart said Minardi would not want to rush things on Alex if he was not ready for the most prestigious but challenging motor racing event in the world.

"The one thing we do not (want to) do is rush this and push him too far, too fast. It must be done in a professionally structured way and that is how you get the results," he added.

On the sponsorship agreement with the Malaysian Motorsports Organisers and Competitors Association (MMOCA), he said while there was tremendous potential for sponsorships and even technical partnerships, it would take time to materialise.

MMOCA is leading a consortium, appointed by Minardi F1 team to market US\$5 million (RM19 million) worth of advertising spaces for the remaining 2001 season.

Asked whether MMOCA had secured any sponsors for Minardi, he said: "Not at this moment. It is very early days but I am quite sure that if you have a Malaysian driver in F1, I would expect the exposure that it would give to Malaysia and Malaysian businesses will make sponsorships really a worthwhile proposition".

Stoddart however declined to elaborate whether the government would become one of the sponsors for Minardi as it did before with the then Jackie-Stewart team in 1997 through Tourism Malaysia for RM20 million.

"I think the government has shown its commitment to motorsport, a wonderful circuit has been built, and the Malaysian GP which you all should be very proud of. So really...I think anything further than that, you just have to wait and see," he said.

Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein was earlier reported as saying that the government would reassess its non-sponsor policy for Alex if he

failed to secure enough sponsors to drive for Minardi.

On Alex's application for a super licence, Stoddart said that would not be a problem as there were others who were given the licence despite racing for shorter period.

-- BERNAMA

MOT AFY ZUL