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Malaysia can cash in as F1 `tyre war' spills over

Radzi Sapiee

IT is said that a competitive tyre is worth an extra three seconds a lap.

This is especially true in Formula One where a three-second cut in one lap can make all the difference between a winner and a backmarker, engine, chassis, individual driving style and track incidents notwithstanding.

It is also said the right tyres are worth more than 100 extra horsepower in a car's engine as the efficiency of grip would transmit optimum power to the ground to translate into speed, power that would have otherwise been wasted to stationary wheel-spins and such.

This would likely come with the return of French tyre-makers Michelin to F1 this year after a 16-year absence. Japanese rivals Bridgestone, who were the sole suppliers after US-based Goodyear left in 1998, were forced to fight again and this has upped the game.

Although world motorsports body FIA have introduced new aerodynamic regulations this year, said to reduce car performance by up to 20 per cent perhaps in anticipation of faster times due to the `tyre war', lap times have decreased as shown at the Malaysian Grand Prix in Sepang.

The race might just be the second in a calendar of 17 and the full potential of the war had not been realised but the cars were posting lap times of a second less than last year's, at least during the dry qualifying session (2001 saw the first wet race in Sepang, making the cars a bit slower).

While reading an article on the `tyre war', it dawned on me that Malaysia can also be part of the game.

A European-based monthly noted how far-reaching the tyre war is. Both Michelin and Bridgestone still tie for top place, revenue-wise, with direct tyre-related sales worldwide amounting to RM50 billion in 1999.

But the household names who have 250 years' industry experience also have a serious rival in Goodyear, who merged with Japan's Sumitomo Rubber Industries two years ago. The entity might still be behind in dollars and cents but they are leading the field with more than 200 million tyres shipped annually.

Their fierce rivalry had lead them to cast their nets wider and this include Bridgestone buying a second factory in China and Michelin committing nearly RM1 billion to expand capacity in Thailand.

So how could Malaysia feature? For one, we still have a substantial rubber industry although not as big as when we are the world number one in the 80s when synthetic rubber was still trying to find its way out of the labs.

Then, we have a still fairly good research facility in the Malaysian Rubber Institute (MRI), a Formula One circuit in Sepang and extreme weather, dry and wet, which could support rigorous testing at the highest levels.

Michelin's 63-year-old veteran motorsports director Pierre Dupasquier had said at an FIA Press conference here that they would like to work on monsoon tyres and they were looking forward to a wet race here.

The F1 fraternity have already known about Malaysia's hot and humid weather, having been here since the inaugural Malaysian GP in 1999 but recently, for the first time, they learned what extreme wet weather is all about.

McLaren's former world champion Mika Hakkinen had said the rain in Malaysia is not like in Europe and that was why he drove too carefully as

both McLarens lost to arch-rivals Ferrari, who proved superior in the wet.

Several cars have spun at several places on the 5.543km Sepang F1 Circuit and it will be a real challenge to make tyres that could stop this.

Now, you only get that sort of weather within 400km of the equator or so and among the current F1 destinations, only Malaysia and Brazil fit the picture.

But we have an extra boost with two monsoon seasons from the north-west winds early in the year and the north-east towards the end.

The industrial areas of Thailand are more than 800km north of this line while China and India, which also have Bridgestone plants, are way off.

Labour might be cheaper at these places but we have the right conditions, including a Government committed to expanding motorsports.

What we should do now is to persuade the big tyremakers to set up shop here. Their presence would also up our own game, especially in view of the coming Asian Free Trade Agreement (AFTA).

Furthermore, we could also get the F1 teams to test their cars and tyres here outside of Malaysian GP.

We could have a power-broker making the deal, at least at the next Malaysian GP next March where all F1 big guns will be at and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad could do something about this.