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Putting the money where the mouth is

Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir

I WISH to respond to your comments in "I Must Say" of CBT September 1, 2002, regarding the Formula Malaysia Championship.

This response is not sanctioned by Suzuki, Silverstone Tyres or Sepang International Circuit. But since I was involved in organizing the demo race, I feel that I am qualified to respond.

The Formula Malaysia Championship was a private sector initiative spearheaded by Suzuki Motorsports, Silverstone Tyres and Sepang International Circuit. It was a promotional event to display the Formula Suzuki Hayabusa and the talents of some Malaysian drivers against the cream of the Japanese drivers already racing in this series in Japan.

The race car is a Formula Suzuki Hayabusa, designed by Suzuki Motorsports using parts from their Suzuki Hayabusa 1,300 cc superbike. You can argue that the car lacks "track record", is expensive, too fast etc.

Against what do we compare this car to? Against a non-existent Malaysian-designed chassis?

Even Van Diemen, Tatuus, Mygale and the other established chassis designers started out with no track record and they are equally as expensive.

Those three chassis designers make great chassis but you won't see them here promoting a race series. That's not their job. Of course, you didn't know that Suzuki would have allowed the chassis to be built in Malaysia by Malaysians. We had already identified a certain sportscar manufacturer with great skills in spaceframe chassis technology to undertake this.

I am sure that when a company like Suzuki Corp sets out to do something, they will put together the required resources to get it right. How long that takes really depends on how commercially successful their programme turns out to be. As for the costing, a little sharp negotiations and commitment to numbers ordered would have brought the price down significantly.

Is this car the first rung up the single-seater ladder to Formula 1?

No, it isn't and it was never promoted as such. Suzuki has the smaller, much cheaper 660cc-engined car that would have been more suitable for younger, novice, learner drivers. A hybrid of the smaller engine in the bigger chassis was also mooted for training purposes.

Is this car the only starting point for young Malaysian drivers aspiring to reach F1?

No, but how many other entities are putting money where their mouth is and offering solutions?

None. Lots of talk but nothing has come of it.

The demo race was private sector-promoted and funded. Silverstone and Suzuki Motorsports came to Malaysia and said "Here, I offer you the use my cars free-of-charge. I offer to invest in your driver development programme with the resources and technology that I have".

For each Japanese mechanic that worked on the cars, there was a Malaysian mechanic.

In fact, it was a Malaysian company, WRC Motorsports, that managed all the technical support for the race. They even helped in further developing the car. Isn't that transfer of technology?

Suzuki and Silverstone paid for the cars to be brought into and raced in Malaysia and Magnum Corp Bhd co-sponsored the event. I salute Suzuki, Silverstone and Magnum for coming forward and answering Malaysia's call to

develop and promote motorsports. Neither the car nor the series was forced upon the Government to be made the basis of our motorsports development programme. It was and still is all a private sector initiative. Whether it takes off is also a private sector, commercially driven decision.

Is the Formula Suzuki Hayabusa too fast for 14 year olds?

The young drivers were invited to test the cars but none drove in the demo race because of licensing issues.

Were they frightened by the experience? Maybe.

Were they thrilled? Definitely.

Given enough time in the car, they would have been able to exploit the potential of the cars. Those who drove in the demo race were older, experienced drivers who gave the Japanese drivers a run for their money.

Rizal Ramli, 27, who won the race, is now racing in Germany's Formula 3 series.

Outright speed is only one aspect of performance driving. The design of the chassis, suspension, braking and transmission systems, all contribute to making a racer safe to drive.

Placing a 14 year old "kid" in a racer capable of 200km/h is as dangerous as putting a 6 year old "baby" in a kart capable of 40km/h. All motorsports is inherently dangerous.

Designing a chassis for racing is not easy. To make a "proper formula", whatever that means, that is durable, reliable and cost under RM50,000 (as required by you) is indeed a challenge.

Will this chassis be properly engineered or just a trial and error effort? Who decides on the "formula" to be used? How safe will it then be?

If a 845kg, 55bhp 1-litre Kelisa can attain a top speed of 140km/h, it won't take a rocket scientist to design a lighter single-seater that will do more than that. I shall not question your technical background to see if you are fit to judge the worth of the Suzuki package or any other package.

But do not mistake interest in a subject as being an expert authority on it. Would you have been as critical if the chassis was from a local designer? Would you raise the same issues you are raising now? I would hope so.

Suzuki has their formula and it works for them. An interesting point to note is that BMW Motorsports is also promoting a single-seater racer built from their 1,200cc motorbike components. It is very likely that we will see that series introduced here.

The other important issue is actually having a series to race in. No point having a car and no race to participate in. How do you get sponsors and drivers to buy into a yet-to-be-built car and non-existent series?

Even with government support, finding sponsors is very tough. So I wouldn't rubbish the efforts made by Suzuki and Silverstone when they came to promote their products and series. We should welcome any and all efforts by anyone who wants to help us with our programme and not belittle them nor question their motives.

Mr. Osamu Suzuki, president of Suzuki Corp, himself attended the race in Sepang. That is what I call commitment to your product.

What probably annoyed some quarters is the fact that it was called "Formula Malaysia Championship". In fact, a letter came from an entity that stated that such a name was reserved only for Malaysian companies to use.

Is this a case of misplaced pride? Looks like the attitude was "if I cannot do, then you must not do".

So who are the people in power that you refer to and did they really play a role in bringing the series here?

Our Minister of Youth and Sports, Datuk Hishamuddin Hussein, only gave

moral support for the event. There was no other endorsement from him nor was there any funding from his Ministry. It was a smart-partnership with both sides winning.

I am sure Proton and Perodua can come up with something similar or even better. Question is "When?". Or are they asking themselves "Why should I?". Is single-seater racing relevant to their business? I think not.

So it really boils down to whether or not they want to get involved in this category of driver and technology development. The Government has said that motorsports is something they want to promote. So, what are the Malaysian automotive giants waiting for?

By all means, comment and criticise where appropriate. But get the facts right. Having a regular column in a well-read supplement requires a little more than cursory investigation into the subject to be written about.

Otherwise, the comments will do more damage than good and the credibility and motive of the author questioned.

- Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir