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Motorsports-Japan GT

JAPAN GT TO GO FULLY INTERNATIONAL

By: Hamdan Saaid

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 18 (Bernama) -- There are plans for Japan's leading motorsports race, the Japan Grand Touring Championship (JGTC), to make competitive appearances in at least three more foreign countries.

With the Malaysian round at Sepang Circuit confirmed for the next three seasons, JGTC appears to be looking at more options as negotiations are on for the race to be held in Shanghai (China), Seoul (South Korea) and California (United States) in the near future.

Grand Touring Association (GT-A) project manager for Pacific region, Masaki Tanzawa said apart from that, they would be looking for the possibility of staging more races in Australia, Singapore and Thailand.

"Maybe one day the JGTC can be called the Asia-Pacific Grand Touring Championship with the inclusion of these races in the new (host) countries. We really wanted to go fully international," he told Bernama here today.

GT-A will sign a three-year agreement with Sepang International Circuit (SIC), the administrator of Sepang Circuit, here tomorrow to organise the JGTC race at the circuit on June 18 and 19.

The Malaysian round, cancelled last season due to health concerns over the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, will be the third round of the seven-round championship.

Tanzawa said they were confident that the JGTC races would be accepted by foreign car enthusiasts as the car models were closer to the audiences rather than the extremely popular Formula One cars.

"We will evaluate the 2004 season as the first year for internationalising the JGTC. The Japan GT races are now, without doubt, high-level world class events. We want to help develop the motorsports culture in the world," he said.

Asked why JGTA picked Malaysia ahead of the more developed countries, Tanzawa said the country had a good background in motorsports

industry as well as great backing by the government.

"We have been looking for some plans to spread our races outside Japan and after investigating (various factors), we found that Malaysia has a good background in motorsports fund.

"Apart from that, you have a wonderful Sepang Circuit with all the experience staff. We know we should not face any problem," he said.

JGTC, first held in 1994 with just five rounds, was staged in Malaysia as exhibition races in 2000 and 2001.

It became an official championship race in 2002, known as the Malaysian-leg of the JGTC, giving roots for the race series to take shape in Southeast Asia.

Due to last year's SARS outbreak, a substitute race was held at Fuji Speedway under the name of "Malaysian JGTC at Fuji Speedway" on July 12 and 13 last year.

Malaysian-based team Amprex Motorsports, will be one of 40 teams taking part in this year's championship.

Tanzawa said they hoped to see more companies and teams as well as foreign car manufacturers take part in the JGTC.

"Even the local car manufacturer Proton can enter the JGTC race as our regulations permitted them to take part. Unfortunately, we haven't got any response from them so far," he added.

Tomorrow's signing ceremony will be done between GT-A chairman Kunimitsu Takahashi and SIC chairman Datuk Mokhzani Tun Mahathir.

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