

13/01/2005

No stopping Mokhzani

By Loke Poh Lin

MORE than just promoting the Sepang International Circuit as a premier entertainment and motorsports venue, SIC chairman Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir hopes to take the auto industry to a different level. Think rally driving school and grooming our very own FI champion. LOKE POH LIN writes.

DATUK Mokhzani Mahathir's office surroundings are filled with masculine colours, textures, smells and products.

At the Porsche and Saab showroom in Glenmarie, there is testosterone in the air. Its grey metal and high-gauge rubber, glass and stainless steel, sleek signages and gleaming torques. And this is not even the Sepang International Circuit (SIC).

Ever since he took over as SIC chairman more than a year ago, Mokhzani has been instrumental in promoting it to the Formula One fraternity as well as exploring new avenues for SIC to shine as a premier entertainment and motorsports venue.

"SIC is first and foremost a racing venue, so we will continue to have exciting, world-class racing events there. That's what it was supposed to do," he says.

"We're also into promoting motor sports, driver training, support manpower training and upgrading of skills. Indeed, we feel that this is an obligation we must fulfil.

"We have a successful motorsports industry in Malaysia and are, at the same time, very involved in the automotive industry. There is a relationship between the two. Through racing, you can help boost development in the auto industry and take it to a different level."

He adds excitedly: "SIC is also a promoter of events. It's a role through which we encourage others to participate in motor sports and to hold their races at the SIC.

"We have already attracted attention from organisers of racing series around the world. Japan is keen. They have five or six circuits but they are venturing out to internationalise their series. Another country doing a similar thing would be Australia. We're just neighbours so it makes sense to explore using us more."

As with any mega-event in the country, SIC has had its share of challenges.

Mokhzani recalls: "General election on F1 race day. That threw our promo programme completely out. I think we lost a 35,000-crowd. Easily. What's more, there were some problems with Selangor's voting booths so fans who had intended to make it for the races were further delayed. Outstation voters couldn't make it at all.

"Nevertheless, we had 84,000 at the track at Sepang that day. All the tourists were there, as were the foreign participants. Which goes to show that the stability of Malaysia is well regarded in the international arena. There's nothing to be feared even at election time."

Every year, SIC faces challenges both at home and abroad. More than any local venue, the SIC is affected by world events, especially those which raise questions about travel safety.

In 2002, it was recovering from the 9/11 terrorist attack. And then in 2003, a few days before the opening of the F1 season, the US invaded Iraq. And of course there were the health scares, from the Nipah virus to the SARS outbreak.

Yet, in spite of all these, SIC packed in a full calendar in 2004:

Formula One Petronas Malaysian Grand Prix, Japan GT and Formula Nippon, Merdeka Millennium Endurance, Malaysian Super Series and the Motorcycle GP. There were also the go-kart, the motorcross and drag battle races.

This year looks even more vibrant with Mokhzani pulling out a few aces he has been hiding up his sleeves. He elaborates: "We are working to ensure that Formula Nippon races here again. The race last year was very interesting to watch but it could have done with more promotion.

"The A1 GP was promoted heavily in Europe, the Middle East and North America. Alex Yoong has the franchise for Malaysia. We want to encourage this kind of initiative. We will support him and make every effort to bring this kind of race to the SIC.

"The 4x4 jamborees have also garnered a lot of interest. We'll do more of this kind of racing this year. As for motorcross, we are promoting these at the Felda schemes. There are a lot of young riders keen on this sport. We can encourage them by setting up dirt tracks and organising meets.

"Through competitions, we will be able to identify those with potential and we'll take the winners to SIC for further development. As with all sports, the time to hit them is when they are young. It's how we are going to find a world champion."

Mokhzani is walking his talk by setting the wheels in motion with a driving school with a difference, in partnership with Karamjit Singh, Malaysia's top rally driver and winner of the Asia Pacific Rally Championship and the FIA Production Car World Rally Championship 2002.

"We haven't started the school yet but we have formed a company. Karamjit was one of my tutors in 2000 when he was racing as a member of the Petronas EON Race Team (PERT). I was eating his dust and breathing his fumes as he led the race," recalls Mokhzani.

"He was kind enough to advise me on how to improve my driving. We became friends and I respect his skills and achievements in the field. We both feel that these ought to be passed down to the next generation of drivers. The rally school is going to be located at Dengkil and, for starters, we plan to buy a couple of rally cars from EON.

"Karamjit, who's going to be the sifu behind the training, will mastermind the whole thing. He can train other rally drivers as well. They will be able to teach the basic and intermediate levels to budding circuit and rally drivers after they graduate from go-karting."

The best place, Mokhzani feels, to smell out new talent is at the go-kart tracks where young kids can be observed as they race round the tracks. It's superior car control, confidence and race craft which will distinguish some as potential champs. What they need is a Yoong or a Karamjit to polish them into worldclass material.

Mokhzani points out: "We need to identify and groom newcomers in a systematic and disciplined manner. We need a measurable outcome in order to gain the confidence of the private sector. We have to package them in order to sell them as prospects to the corporate sponsor.

"Our Government has been generous enough to provide infrastructure like the SIC. Now we need to groom the people to grace the tracks. It goes without saying that we need private sector support to adopt the programmes, and drivers."

For sure, Malaysia will not be turning out another world champion like Karamjit overnight. "Drivers at go-kart level are about 13-15 years old. After some training, they will be ready for single-seater racing. It will take a lot of time and money to get the next Alex Yoong," Mokhzani explains.

"Successful F1 drivers are a rare breed. It's not just about the money. It involves tons of talent, luck and commitment by the driver himself. No

doubt it may take a long time before we find a new champ but we need to support him and at the same time he has to prove himself."

Most of us will think of the SIC as a race track for Formula One races and nothing more. But Mokhzani has some refreshing ideas on how to increase the use of the circuit.

"We will provide better public access to the drivers; either encourage the drivers to go out to fans, or they can come visit the drivers, who will be made available. Pit visits will be a norm.

"We will continue to invite educational institutions to the track. Engineering students can gain first-hand knowledge of how an F1 car works and this will give them an insight into what it takes to design an F1 car or how to run a motor GP team.

"There will be more non-motor sports activities at SIC as well. I'm quite broadminded when it comes to promoting the SIC. First of all, it is an entertainment venue. So why not concerts? Last year, we had two, one at the helipad and another at the go-kart track. It's a good way to get people to come out to the circuit so that they will get a better understanding of the venue. Like, that it's not far."

"There's also a need to dispel the elitist perception of F1 and motor racing. We sell the cheapest tickets. For example, our hillstand tickets are RM100, which is like STG14. No way can you experience F1 in England for that kind of money. We want people - all kinds of people - to enjoy motorsports.

"SIC can also be used for motorrelated launches. We had a BMW launch here last year. Also, hospitality events and corporate bonding exercises."

With the tsunami relief efforts occupying the world news, Mokhzani will be doing his best to galvanise the F1 fraternity into doing its bit to help the countries that are affected.

"I will be going to the United Kingdom and want to rally the F1 community together to contribute towards the relief of the tsunami victims. As you know, Michael Schumacher is the biggest single donor of funds (US\$10 million) to the tsunami relief effort.

"Malaysia is the only Asian country affected by the tsunami tragedy that has a F1 circuit. F1 is often seen as an almost unapproachable, elitist sport, only to be enjoyed by the wealthy. This compassionate effort will help give it a more human face."

That's not all. This Sunday, a charity drive in aid of the tsunami relief fund is on at the SIC. Fans of motorsports are invited to drive on to the circuit, drive around in their own vehicles or, if they don't have their own, drive those belonging to SIC.

"You can also drive round the track with participating celebrities, or be driven by them. And if you so choose, you can also have a spin with Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself. For a price, of course!

With a progressive at the helm of the SIC, it can only augur well for the circuit for the future. It's time for Malaysian motorsports to make its mark in the international arena. We already have the infrastructure. We just need a new generation of homegrown talent to ignite the fire.

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