



A SPECIAL MOMENT: Young Azri being hoisted high by Abdullah at the breakfast reception.

Catch them young, says Abdullah

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PUTRAJAYA, Thurs. — Athletes must be groomed from young so that they can be world-class by the time they reach the age of 18, the Prime Minister said today.

"If they can be trained and nurtured while they are young, I am confident we can expect them to become world champions of the future," Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said at a breakfast reception in his office to celebrate the success of the Malaysian contingent to the recent under-18 powerboat Future Formula World Championships 2004.

The team, aged eight to 18, won the world title after they hauled in two golds, two silvers and two bronzes at the championship in Lisbon, Portugal, last weekend.

"I'm very proud that our children have achieved such an extraordinary success," Abdullah said.

He said a young athlete, if given good training from young, could become a champion by the time he reaches his peak period of between age 18 and 25.

Abdullah spent some time chatting with the children before having breakfast together.

Later, the team was treated to another reception by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

Shy little Muhammad Azri Yahya, eight, was clearly the centre of attention. The youngest in the contingent, he

won a gold medal in the Class 1 (ages eight and nine) category.

The pint-sized racer beat bigger-bodied opposition from Germany, Portugal, Italy, Russia and the Czech Republic.

Azri said he was confident of beating the other contestants in his event.

He said he was attracted to boat races after watching the sport on television.

His coach and Formula Future programme manager Farid Yusof described Azri as a born racer.

"He stands apart from other children because he displays confidence and courage. He is also a quick learner, is obedient and disciplined," Farid said.

Azri lives in Putrajaya and is a pupil at Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan Putrajaya 1 in Precinct 8. His father is a policeman and his mother runs a food stall.

He was among many who signed up for the Formula Future programme, launched in September last year. It is aimed at grooming new talent in water sports.

The programme, managed by the Formula Future Club and H2O Sports Sdn Bhd, has trained 132 children and teens who practise at the Putrajaya Lake and Taman Botani Lake here every weekend.