

F1 gets what Karamjit couldn't

Written by straits-mongrel

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Show me the money

By Justin Ong

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Sept 27 — Motorsports costs money. All sports, to some degree, cost money but more to the point, motorsports costs a lot of money. So much money that only the rich or very talented ever

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get to participate here in Malaysia.

First there's the vehicle itself, but rather than being the bulk of your investment, it is merely the gaping hole into which you would proceed to pour all your money into. Modifications can and often do cost more than the car itself. Or even several times the cost of the car.

Once it's up and running, you need more money to keep it going. Maintenance can be frightening, as things which last years on a normal car regularly run only two or three events, not to mention racing parts are often a magnitude more expensive than standard items. Beyond parts, you'll also need a crew to keep the vehicle running. That's money, too.

For the average guy thinking of trying to self-finance his own motorsport career, let me tell you now that it is a financially ruinous venture. Before you know, you'll have pumped in more money than you actually have. And when you win, you discover the purse barely even covers your tyres.

I've seen some amateur participants at local events where it's blatantly obvious there's more heart than money. Sometimes that's just life; these people are in it solely for the thrill. Other

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times, it's a crying shame because some of the drivers, if they could find the money, might have gone somewhere.

That's simply weekend warriors who harbour minor ambitions in auto racing. It's saddest when professional drivers, people who have bet their lives and livelihoods on the sport, barely scrape enough money together to make the entrance fee.

That's not a shame, that's a bloody disgrace.

While the country is now supposedly throwing its weight behind the Formula One team currently in conception, it didn't do very much to help one who was already a proven winner and world champion. Karamjit Singh's tale is not only poignant, it is the story of motorsports here in Malaysia: Good enough to win, but couldn't afford the bus fare to get there.

If you followed the travesty of Karam's troubles — which got so bad he couldn't even pay to ship his car back from a race — you'll know motorsports here in Malaysia is a non-starter. If you can't wrangle enough sponsorship money when you already can show you're a winner, what hope is there where you're just starting out?

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Maybe rallying is too mucky, too spectator-unfriendly. But then A1GP's Team Malaysia hasn't fared much better either.

If there was a motorsport where the whole country could get behind, A1GP has to be it. Billed as the World Cup of motorsports, it pits country against country on the circuits. Now doesn't this sound like the type of competition that could fuel national pride?

But like most other forms of motorsport here, it's barely managed to get any kind of serious sponsorship. Certainly not anywhere remotely near the kind of money that's being touted for the upcoming Lotus F1 team. Though they carried Proton's emblems on their cars, I don't know if they ever got paid for it. Or if they did, whether they were paid very much.

Malaysians couldn't be roused to support a Malaysian team battling it out against Indonesia, Singapore, China, et al. Is there any reason they would back Malaysia versus Mercedes-Benz, Ferrari, and Toyota? I can't say for sure; maybe they will or maybe they won't.

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But what's for certain is the reason why Karam and A1GP Team Malaysia have had such a hard time finding sponsorship dollars is because, by and large, Malaysians don't care for motorsports. Corporate sponsors know this and thus are reluctant to pump any kind of money into it.

Beyond just F1, Malaysia hosts numerous other racing events — both amateur and professional. While the disciplines are diverse, the one unifying characteristic that ties all these races together is the dearth of spectators. Few know about them, and fewer still attend.

It's just not in our culture. It can be, of course. Just not how it currently is. But until there is concerted effort to promote, cultivate and support the races and racers we already have, it's going to be hard to see why we should take the Lotus F1 team seriously as a Malaysian motorsport effort. And harder still to see where it can all go.

As a Malaysian-owned venture, sure. As a questionable advertising blitz, maybe. But as a team that's supposed to mean something to Malaysians all over the country? 1 Malaysia F1 — DNS.