

MY SAY: Will F1 go the way of fox-hunting?

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Comment

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When Malaysia announced that it wanted to be a more active player in Formula One (F1) by sponsoring, managing and developing its own team and machine, it was greeted with much excitement. Some lauded it as a bold move in the world of automotive engineering, and others for its multi-billion advertising and promotional advantages. That it is a private sector's initiative involving some of the most creative and successful entrepreneurs that the country has seen makes the proposition look like a winning formula all round.

But the recent move by Toyota — one of the world's largest automakers — to pull out of F1 seems to indicate that it is not easy to excel on the fast track. Toyota, which made its debut some eight years ago, and participated in about 140 championship races, did not win a single one. Toyota cited a familiar reason when it decided to get involved: it wanted to create a kind of brand awareness to compete with its more well-known rivals in the West. The Japanese auto giant also saw the move as a good platform to showcase its expertise in designing F1 machines, and as a launching pad for more sophisticated engines. So, whatever the cost (some estimate that Toyota had to fork out two billion yen or RM75 million for every race), its entry was regarded as justifiable. After all, it is Toyota, the car company!

Hence, when cost was cited as one of the main reasons for the withdrawal, it raised eyebrows. More so, when another famous Japanese automaker, Honda, pulled out early this year. So, too, has Germany's BMW. France's Renault is said to be contemplating a similar move. Even Bridgestone, the tyre-maker, apparently will cease supplying tyres for F1 from 2011.

A similar trend is seen in other motor sports. The maker of Subaru (Fuji Heavy Industries Ltd) has stopped participating in the World Rally Championship, while Mitsubishi has pulled out of the popular Dakkar Rally. All these developments appear to be dictated by business decisions, but they also suggest that F1 is at a crossroads.

There are other substantial reasons behind the erosion of popularity of F1 — F1 cars are too costly to maintain and they are not eco-friendly (the noise is deafening). Besides, there is also the question of a worldwide shift in consumer demands.

Today, the talk is all about smaller and environmentally clean vehicles that are cost-effective to maintain. Speed — which is what F1 is most noted for — no longer takes the spotlight. If it is true that more automakers may withdraw from the new F1 season, the future scenario will change. Indeed, the F1 industry is beginning to rethink its position in response to the growing demand for cleaner-powered cars, instead of vehicles driven by fossil fuel. Even hybrid cars, like Toyota's Prius, is not regarded as the industry standard anymore. Major automakers are now turning to electricity to power the next generation of eco-friendly, competitively priced cars.

After all, cars have become a necessity for the masses for everyday use. And here is the challenge. Though the days of the energy-guzzlers are over, some still survive in slightly modified forms. Now with climate change and global warming hitting hard, a more drastic change is required. A gas-guzzler, no matter how expensively well-modified it is, is no longer an elite symbol.

In other words, what is needed today is technological innovativeness that can meet the demands of consumers the world over, without showing disrespect for nature. Toyota, being a "green" industrial leader, is making the call for change loud and clear. Indeed, the time has come for the motor world to change and this includes other related sports.

F1 may go the way of fox-hunting. Fox-hunting was regarded as an elite sport that had long outlived its "joyfulness" because of the demeaning values it promoted with respect to nature, not to mention the massive resources it commanded for the pleasure of a few. The sport was banned in Britain in 2004.

So, F1 in its current form will soon meet the same fate as fox-hunting. Unless, of course, it rids its "fox-hunting" mentality that cares only for a very select group at the expense of the billions of others who have to suffer the long-term ecological consequences.

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