

F1 starts to choke off big tobacco

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CONGRATULATIONS Malaysia, for once again successfully hosting the Malaysian leg of the world championship Formula One Grand Prix last month.

It was also a race where the Ferrari team led by Michael Schumacher did not clinch a victory.

Hopes were high that the German driver would be a leading contender despite failing to finish the season opener in Australia.

This is in contrast to last year where he won most of the races.

Fernando Alonso dominated the Malaysian Grand Prix to win ahead of a strong drive from Toyota's Jarno Trulli and Williams' Nick Heidfeld.

Seven-time world champion Schumacher finished a distant seventh. While many sports fans must have felt sorry for the King of F1, tobacco control advocates have reason to rejoice.

For one, there were fewer Marlboro logos across the sports section of the media when Schumacher failed.

This augurs well for Malaysia, especially as the country promotes the Tak Nak campaign.

As the campaign highlights smoking as a loser's choice, the last thing we need is contradictory messages such as tobacco brands associated with a winner.

Coincidentally, this losing streak for the partly Marlboro-sponsored team can also be interpreted as an early sign that tobacco sponsorship for F1 races is butting out.

By 2006, all tobacco sponsorship for motor sports is expected to be phased out worldwide.

In October 2000, the FIA (Federation Internationale de Automobile) adopted a resolution calling for "a world-wide ban on tobacco advertising and sponsorship in international motor sport from the end of the 2006 season".

This was tailored to complement the European Union's ban as well as by other governments around the world that timed their bans in line with the EU move.

However, this is not going to be easy because tobacco money, at more than US\$350 million annually (RM1.33 billion), has greased the race for a long time now. In addition, many teams are directly funded by the industry.

But with the recent implementation of the World Health Organisation's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), it is hoped more governments will support the anti-tobacco treaty aimed at curbing tobacco advertising in all forms, both at the national and international levels.

After all, increasingly, F1 teams are not funded by big tobacco. The Sauber-Petronas team is one of them.

The F1 teams funded by too much money can expect mounting pressure from other major sponsors and governments who do not want to be associated with products as a direct form of marketing to millions of viewers worldwide.

One thing is certain, though. The industry will do its utmost to keep countries from implementing the ban on tobacco sponsorship. In all likelihood, developing countries with poor tobacco control regulations or those that are cash-strapped will be easy targets.

They will then be venues for future F1 races, instead of the developed countries that generally have very stringent controls.

Developing countries will act as convenient pit-stops for the industry unless they quickly ratify the FCTC that forbids the promotion of tobacco products through F1 races. This goes for Malaysia as well.

What needs to be borne in mind is that the industry is able to develop a global appeal for its brands through extensive broadcast media coverage specifically directed at young people.

So, too, its merchandising proposals and activities aimed at children. It is no wonder that a tobacco company has even established its own racing team.

For example, British American Racing is owned by British American Tobacco (BAT) Plc.

Last month, BAT in Malaysia reportedly was named the top company on Bursa Malaysia in terms of last year's earning shares, and is said to be a favourite with fund managers.

It posted a pre-tax profit of nearly RM1.1 billion, though no comparative figures on the cost of human sufferings and death were given. This is the reality we must face us when all the excitement is gone.

Sad to say, this reality has not cause any stir among those who are supposed to monitor and control tobacco-sponsored activities around the country.

The next big one is, of course, the so-called "Asian Tobacco Connection" in November this year where members of the Asian tobacco industry, will meet.

Should this be allowed to continue, Malaysia will really be "the pits" stop as far as tobacco control is concerned.

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