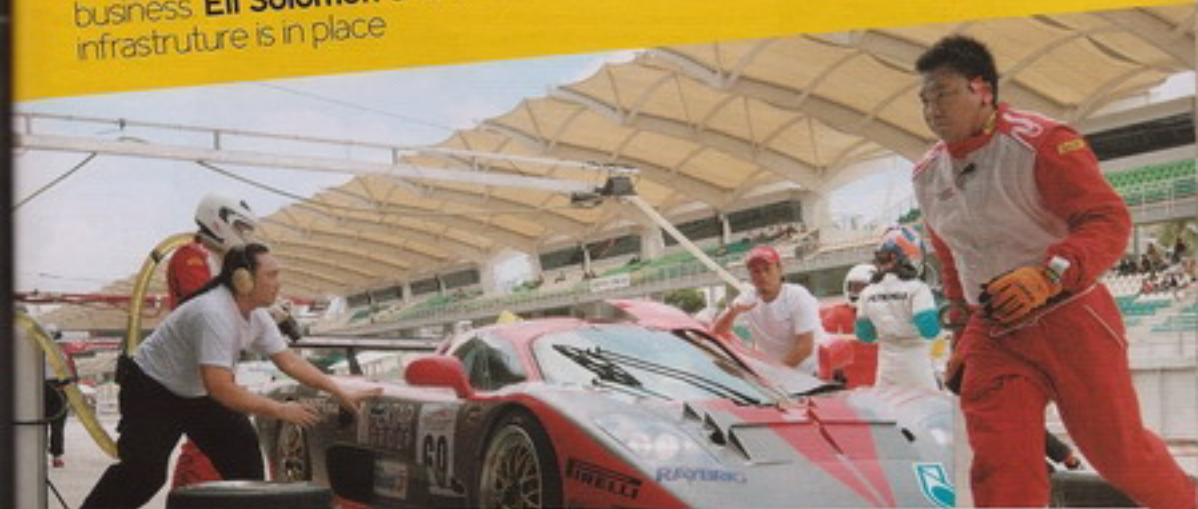


BUILDING BLOCKS AND FERTILE SOIL

Motorsports might be a passion for some, but in the larger context it is a business. **Eli Solomon** extols on an industry's potential if the right infrastructure is in place

Photography by Eli Solomon



MALAYSIA'S 12-HOUR MERDEKA Millennium Endurance race, held annually in August, is arguably one of the top three events in the packed annual calendar of the Sepang International Circuit. The event brings competitors and teams together from across the world. Ok, the MME is no Le Mans, but it is as much grassroots as it is international. You get to watch for free and yet the stands are not packed. Whatever the reason, the fact is that the state and local businesses reap rewards in excess of what most of us are aware of.

Take for example one European team from Slovakia. A Porsche from Bratislava, as a matter of fact. Here is an Eastern European state that

only a few years ago forbade its citizens from making a profit on anything. These guys arrived with backing from German lube company LiquiMoly. The company has its Asian HQ in Singapore. They have a Sias, a German and a Japanese driving the Porsche. LiquiMoly charters two big buses. The charter costs \$8,000. They pack these with corporate clients and media and occupy a chunk of a five-star hotel to house everyone for the weekend. Accommodation costs around \$60,000. Seminars are held. Add \$5,000 for that. Then they take up a large hospitality suite at the circuit and keep everyone well-fed and paddock-passed. Add \$45,000 for that. The

transport system has benefited. The hotel industry has benefited. Sepang International Circuit has benefited. Cost of the whole exercise for that single sponsor for just entertaining its clients without even imputing the cost of entry and race? Around \$130,000 to watch Porsche number 44 claw its way up the grid until the engine picked up some debris and the fan belt sheared. Whatever the team's on-track result, the company achieved its objective of building brand awareness.

Further down the pit line is a local team with a ground-pounding Chevy big-block shoehorned into the Mosler MT900 GT3. The drivers include an Englishman, a Singaporean. >



and a Malaysian lad below the age of consent? Who do you think set the fastest time in that car? The kid is going places. The crew is predominantly local. That meant families were in attendance as well as the eager press. There was a PR team, a physiologist and dietician. They may even have had a masseur but I didn't notice. They did have a pair of pit girls though. Part of the show. None of these come free. In a previous event, the team had to fly in a small part on very short notice. The local airline charged over \$2,800 for the additional team member and a 2 ounce item. No one thought twice about this. To finish first, first you have to finish. The sponsors expect it and want to see their names power past at least 300 times at the MME. The ThunderAsia Mosler MT900R, led by Singapore's Melvin Choo, was in front for the first hour. After the JapanGT International at Sepang earlier it was clear that this team would be one of the top contenders. This car is seriously quick. But smart money knows that big engines mean lots of heat generated. Heat soak got to one or two of the components but not before young London-based Jazeman Jaafar, a Malaysian driver to watch, set fastest time of day.

Another very polished outfit was the international team from BMW Petronas Syntium. Quietly confident of their two Z4s the crew went about their task like they had been at it forever. One of the cars had seen international competition, the other was fresh. This is a very, very professional operation of some calibre, run by a team principal with two generations of motorsports behind him and years of loyalty to Petronas. Who says you need the fastest car to win a race? Especially if it's a long race of attrition. You also need to do your brake disc changes in a minute flat! I could only watch with some amazement as they performed this task faster than others were able to change wheels. Car number 15, the leading car for a large part of the race, suffered a puncture towards the end and handed the lead to the number 28 car. Both cars finished first and second. To finish first...

The Porsche 911 GT3 Cup cars were always with a chance as well, especially last year's winning team, Porsche Club Singapore. It's now hard to define national teams, especially if all three drivers come from various parts of the world. Motor racing is about the individual and the team. With experience behind them, starting from the back, and with rear suspension work required early on, the number 11 GT3 still managed to claw its way to a podium finish, albeit six laps behind the Petronas BMW Z4s.

Even further down the grid I met some friends who race at the MME annually, including the son of a Singapore Grand Prix winner (in 1966). Japanese cars such as a Honda Integra and a Civic were going to fight for a class win. Incredibly competitive when you have the Malaysian Type R Garage Racing guys doing slick pit stops to rival any international outfit. Much too competitive yet without the allure of an overall win.

The logistics of preparing and running a car at the MME will always baffle me. We can only skim the surface when we write about such things. It's not just a single team but a grid of 46 cars that go through the same routine which is what the statistics make interesting reading. While there was almost no evidence of corporate sponsorship from Singapore companies outside of what LiquiMoly hauled over, five Singapore-led teams mixed it out with six from Hong Kong and sixteen international teams this year, not counting the Malaysian entries that made up the grid of 46 cars. This was the tenth MME run, a successful endurance event that appears to be ripe for the next big push – a full 24-hour event.

While Malaysia already has a strong motorsport culture, Singapore is in a somewhat

unique position itself. It has the benefit of hindsight and can now establish a whole new industry without having invested a penny in motorsport infrastructure for nearly 35 years. There are two analogies here. Leave an engine block out in the rain and sun for a long time and it relieves the block of all its stresses. BMW did that with its 1500cc road engine and turned it into one of the strongest turbocharged engines in the world. Singapore threw out its engine in October 1973. Today that engine has magical powers. On the other hand, the soil has to be fertile for the seed to germinate. In Singapore's case, this 36-year impasse has meant that the country has been left behind, albeit free of the stress of supporting the sport. Germination was for the old world. Even Bernie Ecclestone has to agree.

Malaysia's motorsport evolution was less traumatic. From the Kenny Hill Speite came the temporary circuit in Petaling Jaya, then the permanent circuit at Shah Alam, followed by the world class Formula 1 venue at Sepang. It took nearly 40 years for that to happen in Selangor. The soil was fertile. The seed was able to germinate. Both models seemed to have worked out fine however. But there is one fundamental difference between the two. Germination meant an established race circuit while the Singapore model remains that of a cost-effective street circuit that can be dismantled and stored away the day after the race. But it does nothing to build a burgeoning motorsport industry.

What if Singapore had a permanent circuit of its own? What should it represent and how does one defend a case for it? A permanent circuit does much more than just bring in tourists three days a year to shop and eat. Perhaps the only way to build a permanent circuit with



Garage of the Honda Integra crew didn't just look interesting, they were very slick.



prime land pricing is to make sure the track is incidental to the whole thing. These are questions that bidders and the Singapore Sports Council must have wrestled with since well before the announcement of the tender for the Changi Motorsport Hub earlier this year. One bidder has plans to put together a package that included everything from university involvement to a heritage centre. Most of us don't even know that Singapore had a massed-start sprint around the Kallang Airport in 1949! Could the numbers for the CMH add up to being commercially viable venture for a good quality bid? What about the benefits that a circuit can bring to the state? These are tough questions to answer when there are too few case studies to follow. How will the public react if the state provides funding for a sport deemed to be for the rich only? And socially irresponsible as well. How does the state recognise the economic contribution a circuit and its facilities provides in terms of expertise and other potential spin offs and jobs created? Who takes credit for Changi's transformation into a vibrant hub of daily activity?

Picture the transformation around Changi if

there is a permanent circuit. Think of the expertise that will come with support services, the engine tuners flying in, the industry that will come about as a result, the fabricators that we no longer have, not to mention the amount of work that goes into organising a single race weekend. Motorsport is a heavyweight service sector business. We often forget that the car on the grid isn't just a car with a driver but an entire team of people working around it. We also forget that it won't be the track operator who benefits so much as the state and the private sector, the F&B chains in the vicinity, the taxi drivers, the bus and rail network, even the cleaners.

Without a permanent circuit, how will we ever know if we have a local version of Gordon Murray, or Colin Chapman or Adrian Newey? We want a superstar driver instead, a hero for the media but that would be missing the point. We need to encourage the Neweys of the world to move to Singapore first. That's how new industries spring up. That's how jobs are created and that's what we call foreign talent. And to do that, there must be something more than a three-day circus. ■

The Mosler's local crew prepares for their first pit stop.



A future Malaysian Champion!



There is no replacement for displacement.

