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TODAY EXCLUSIVE

What makes a Singapore racing team?

Local car tuner spends \$400,000 to build a race car, but receives a no-go to represent Team Singapore

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DESIGNED and assembled in Singapore, this racing car costs as much as a new five-room Housing and Development Board flat.

Conceived by a local car tuner and sports car parallel importer – Garage R – the goal is for the team driving it to be the first overseas team to win the Merdeka Millennium Endurance Race at Malaysia's Sepang circuit.

The race will be held at the end of this month.

Yet, while the Garage R Racing Team's Honda Integra DC5 can hit a top speed of 250km/h, the team has encountered a bumpy ride, of sorts. Even though the

backbone of the team – the team director, the engineers and the pit crew – consists of Singaporeans, the team's application in June to be endorsed under Team Singapore's banner was turned down by the Singapore Sports Council (SSC).

The reason: The team's drivers are non-Singaporeans. Instead, two Malaysians and a Briton, who has a Singapore racing licence, will drive the car during the 12-hour endurance race, which has a similar format as the 24-hour Le Mans race in France.

While the Singapore Motor Sports Association (SMSA) supported the Garage R Racing Team's move to be endorsed under the Team Singapore banner, president Tan Teng Lip told TODAY that "the issue is that all of their drivers are non-Singaporeans".

SSC's motor sports department deputy director Fan Chian Jen said certain requirements have to be fulfilled for a motorsports driver to represent Team Singapore.

"The primary criterion is for the driver to be a Singapore citizen. If this criterion

is met, the driver will then be assessed on other criteria, which include his or her track record ie ranked top 10 in at least one international race," he said.

After close consultation with SMSA, the SSC decided that it would not be able to support the application for endorsement as Team Singapore drivers.

Today understands that an invitation to visit the team's workshop to know more about the team's preparations was not taken up by SSC. The team did consider a number of Singaporean professional drivers, but a suitable fit could not be found, said team director Lawrence Lee, 29.

"There are many good drivers around," he said. "However, every athlete has his working habits ... Many drivers may be good individually, but they may not be able to play a team role."

Former A1 Grand Prix driver Denis Lian noted that there are only two Singaporeans based here who can drive a Grand Prix car. The pool, however, widens to about 10 for

touring or GT car drivers, he added, as there are about eight "credible amateur drivers who can paddle a touring or GT car reasonably well".

Mr Lee wondered if a "fairer way" could be used to assess future motor sports teams. He proposed a criterion where a team backed by a Singapore registered company, rather than where the drivers are from, could be used.

"A motor racing team is just like an orchestra, a band, where you have different people playing different instruments coming together to make this successful," he said.

"It is a team sport."

SMSA president Tan Teng Lip felt it "will probably take some time" before SSC reviews these guidelines on motor sports teams here. But even without the endorsement, it is all systems go for Garage R Racing Team. In 2006, the team spent \$280,000 and finished second in their category in the race.

This year, almost \$400,000 has been ploughed into the car over the past two years



Mr Lawrence Lee, team director Garage R racing team. TREVOR TAN

in crew training, parts and technology. Crew members were also sent to Japan for training.

"The heart and soul of this team is Singaporean and we hope to do everyone proud by finishing first,"

said Mr Lee, who was among the pioneer batch of National University of Singapore students to build a race car from scratch to compete in the annual Formula Society of Automotive Engineers car race.

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